

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE 1 • FIRST SHOTS: CRYISIS

Computer Games

[BEHIND THE SCENES]

PREY

Inside the 10-year saga to bring this gravity-defying shooter to your PC



[FIRST LOOK]

Warhammer Storms Online

Mythic takes aim at World of Warcraft

Duke Nukem Forever Lives

We've seen it.
Really. Pg. 41*



We pick the top
console RPGs

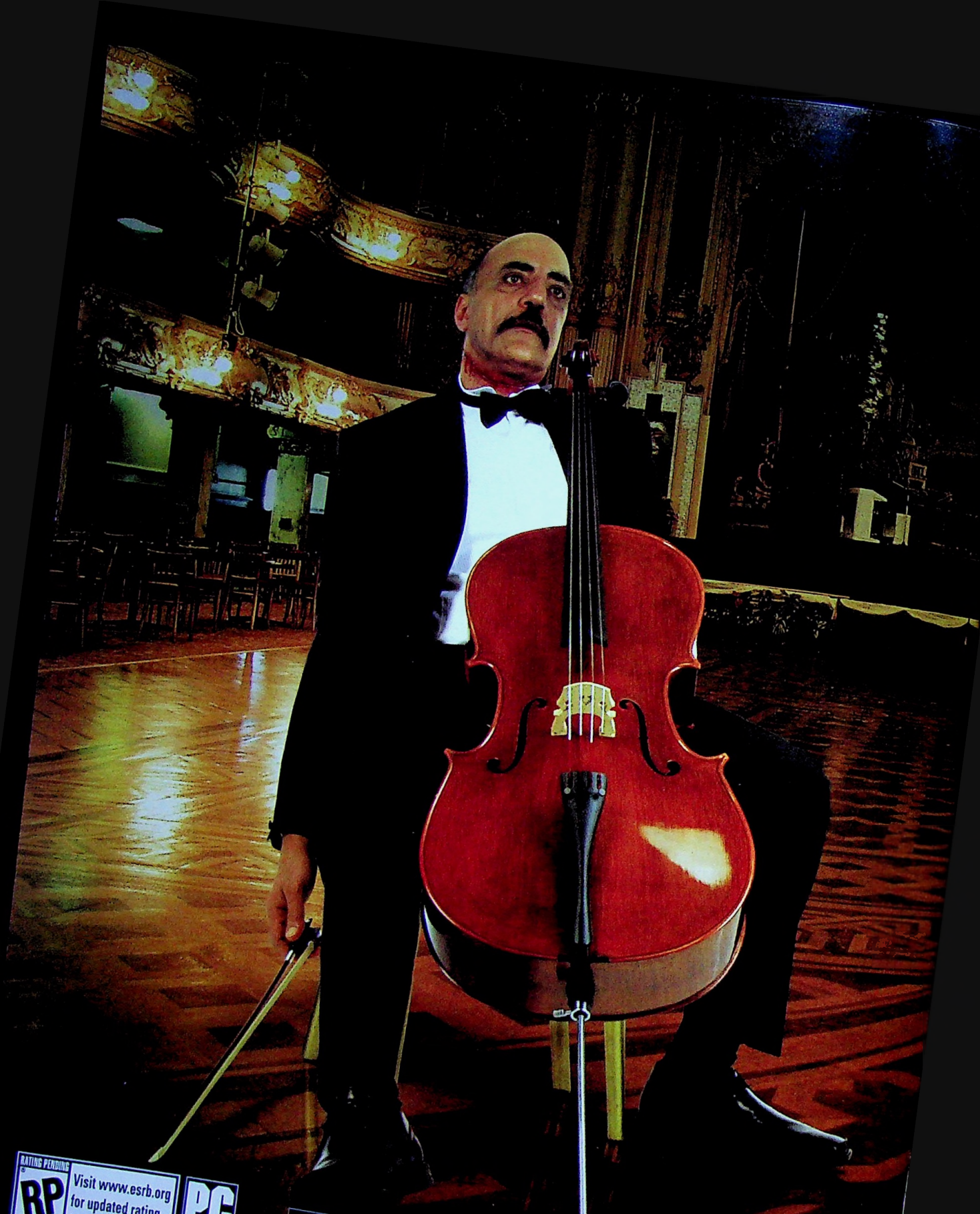
Raph Koster and
Brad McQuaid
debate instances

Philips targets your
senses with amBX

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*No screenshots, though. Sorry.



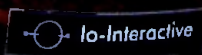
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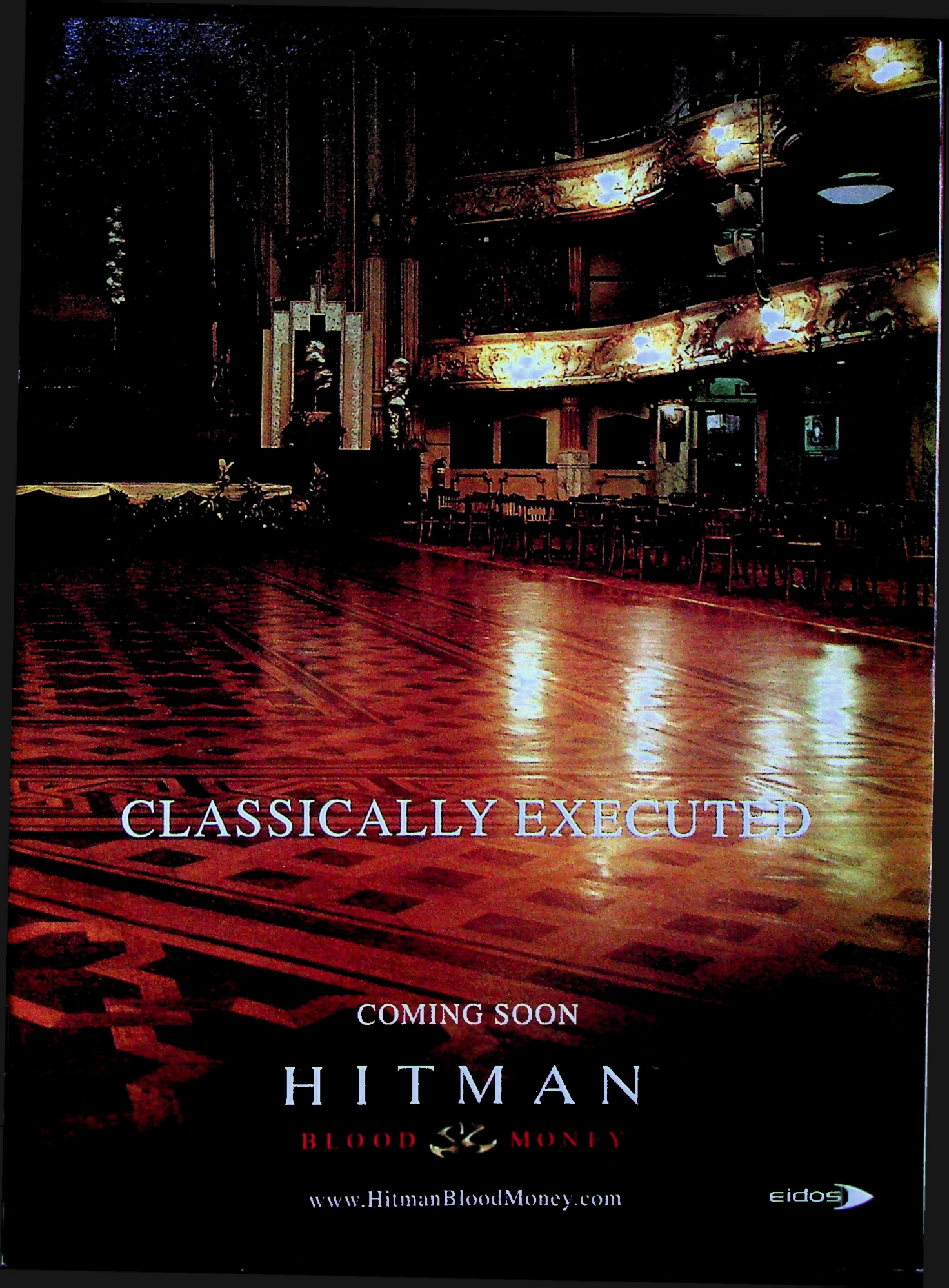
PC
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SOFTWARE



PlayStation 2



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A photograph of a grand, ornate theater interior. The floor is highly polished and reflects the stage lights. The walls are decorated with intricate carvings and murals. The stage is visible in the background, with a large, ornate structure. The overall atmosphere is one of classic elegance and grandeur.

CLASSICALLY EXECUTED

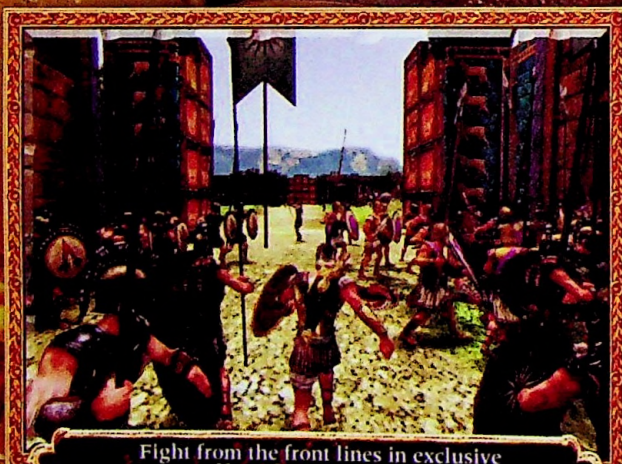
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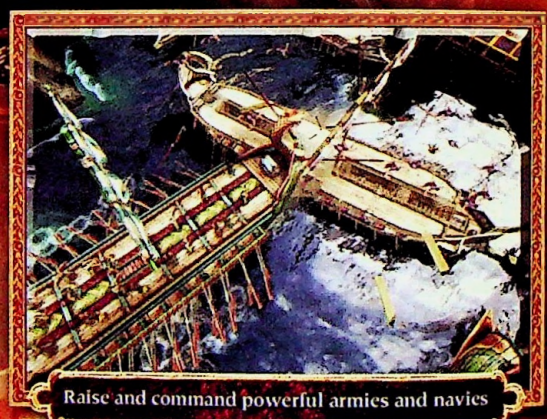
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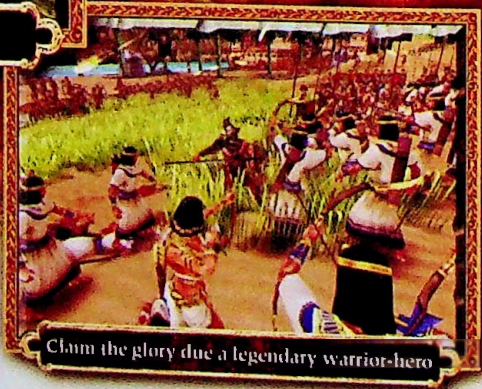
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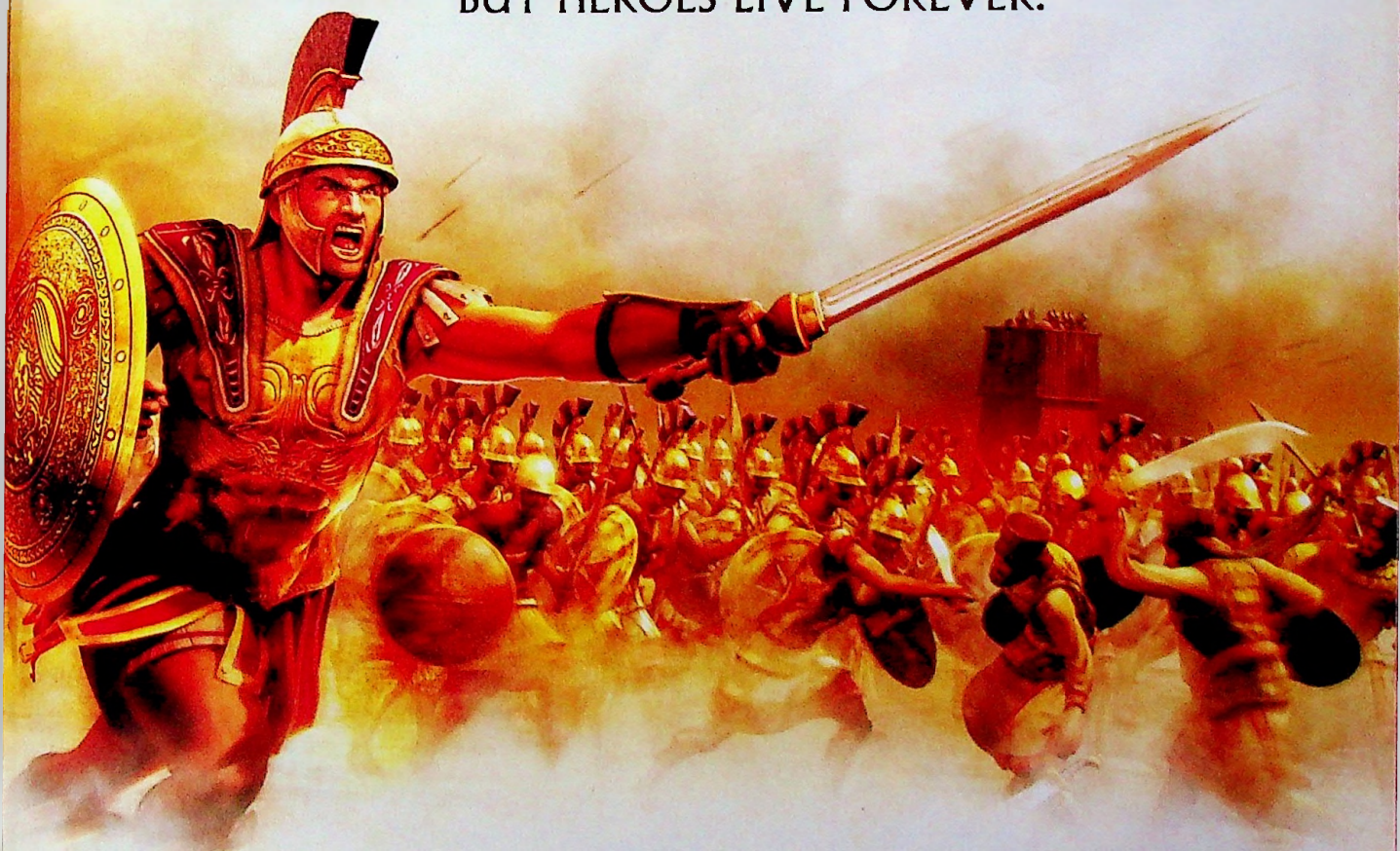
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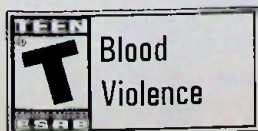
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demo cd



Kill Terrorists Dead

If you didn't get enough terrorist killing with the *Rainbow Six: Lockdown* demo last month, why not take *Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers* for a spin? Speaking of spinning, or at least taking things for a spin, there's also *World Racing 2* for your demonstrating pleasure. Also this month: The usual assortment of quality wallpapers from the nice chaps at gamewallpapers.com.

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12 Issues Basic Rate US: \$19.97 or \$29.97 with CD Canada: \$31.97 or \$41.97 with CD Foreign: \$43.97 or \$53.97 with CD

Back issues available @ 1-800-699-4263

Distributor: Curtis Circulation Co. (201) 634-7400

Reprints available. Foreign reprint rights available

Editorial Offices: 65 Millet Street, Suite 203, Richmond, VT 05477
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Valley Dude

A graphic discussion about graphics with, like, a dude from the Valley

That game has great graphics." It's one of those meaningless statements we toss around without any explanation. Just look at that game, right? Look at the detail, look at the number of polygons, look at the textures, and check out the way each individually modeled blade of grass accurately moves in the wind thanks to the game's detailed weather simulation.

Wait a second, what are you talking about? Those graphics suck. That dude looks... wrong. His face looks molded from plastic. His animation is stiff. His arms don't attach to his body properly. He's generic. Everything is over-detailed. The grass isn't grassy enough, and the wind is over-modeled.

While you can sit and say "graphics don't matter" until you're blue in the face, you're wrong. Of course they matter. Whether we want to believe it or not, they have an enormous impact on the perceived quality of a game. But if you've ever had a serious discussion about graphics with someone else, you've often found yourself at an impasse. One person may praise the "look" and "feel" and "consistency" of a game's artwork, while the other talks almost entirely about its technical accomplishments. In other words, one person is talking about art direction and the other about technology.

If we're to have meaningful discussions about graphics and the visual aspect of games, we need to be talking about the same thing. "Graphics" is a generic descriptor for how a game looks when it's blasted on your screen. Technology is how it gets there, and art direction is a sort of big-picture bible for how all the graphical elements are designed to fit together.

To use one example, *DOOM 3* is more technically sophisticated than *Katamari Damacy*, and it arguably has better "graphics" for that reason alone. But in terms of art direction, I'll take a bunch of weird, flat polygons that have this amazing internal consistency and work beautifully together (*Katamari*) over what looks to me like the notebook scribbles of a 13-year-old death metal fan (the monster design for *DOOM*).

Some people dig those *DOOM* monsters, and that's fine. Others find *Half-Life 2*'s character, monster, and world design generic, while I think it's a near-perfect combination of amazing art direction and superior technology. I think the art direction in Monolith's *No One Lives Forever* series and *TRON 2.0* is superb, even though I've never been in love with

their technology or their character models.

There's no denying that we all have different tastes when it comes to visuals. But is there anything else that affects how we feel about our games and their visuals? There's the notion of the Uncanny Valley, a term that describes the emotional response of humans to robots and other anthropomorphic entities. (I was bummed to find it had nothing to do with my old stomping grounds, the San Fernando Valley.) In a nutshell, it's the point where something artificial is indistinguishable from the real thing on casual inspection, but upon closer scrutiny you get the feeling something is off. Once you reach that point, you're actually repulsed. It's why people can love the exaggerated digital "human" Bob Parr in *The Incredibles*, while the more lifelike ones in *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* or *The Polar Express* creep them out.

In general, videogames aren't even close to generating the same sort of negative reaction. But I suspect realistic graphics negatively impact games in another way. It's not that we're freaked out because the graphics are too close to being real. Instead, the technology is writing checks the gameplay can't cash. The ability to create amazing 3D technology is moving at a much faster rate than the ability to create compelling AI and interactions within a 3D world. When you get realistic-looking characters doing unrealistic things, it creates an even greater disconnect with players. You end up coming away with a stronger negative feeling about "bad AI" or "poor animation" than you might have had with less realistic visuals.

I think the best-looking game in the world right now is *World of Warcraft*. It doesn't have the best technology, but it does have amazing art direction. Its look is undoubtedly one of the elements that draws in new players. If you show a nongamer *DOOM 3* or *EverQuest II*, they're unable to appreciate the amazing technology because they don't understand it. But if you show them *World of Warcraft*, their eyes light up because it's so bright, colorful, and cartoony.

While almost every game has amazing technology, few have good art direction. Given two games that have equally good gameplay, I'd argue that more people are likely to walk away with a positive feeling from the game with better art direction than from the one with superior technology. And better art direction won't require a newer, faster computer, either. ■

by Steve Bauman



"The Uncanny Valley is the point where something artificial is indistinguishable from the real thing on casual inspection, but upon closer scrutiny you get the feeling something is off."

Apparently, our "Game of the Year" awards were so "dead on" that everyone just nodded and put the magazine down, content in their total agreement. That's one explanation of why no one wrote in bitching about our picks. Or maybe they just weren't that controversial. (Okay, they weren't.) Considering the general dearth of feedback we've been experiencing of late, this might be a reach, but we need your help. We're looking for people to contribute regular "State of the Game" reports from various MMOs for the magazine. We want serious players who keep their virtual fingers on the pulse of their particular favorites. Writers will receive compensation for the articles. Strong writing skills are a must. Limited spots will be available for each game, so please send samples or links to articles, blogs, or forum posts to editor@cgonline.com.



Wash, Rinse, Repeat

As a 30-something gamer, you found the problem ["Wash, Rinse, Repeat," March Upfront]. Games are still marketed to people who are more likely to pirate them, and don't play as much as the older computer gamer.

But deeper, you don't have to look much further than the Top 20 sellers to see why the industry is in neutral—there are only two games on that list that are not sequels or part of some franchise. As it is, I buy more game magazines than games.

I'm in my peak earning years, and I'm waiting and wanting to give my money away for a good game, but all I see is the same old stuff. The industry needs to innovate.

David Telford



"SOE has a tendency to delete posts that have any negative content and perma-ban anyone who is in disagreement about the direction they are heading."

I'm 17 years old, and consider myself an avid PC gamer. I have many friends that also play PC games. Regarding the comment, "PC gamers are getting older, buying fewer games, and aren't being replaced by kids," I must say that I disagree with the second half. There are teenagers today that do play PC games, and I happen to be one of them.

It saddens me to hear people talk about the "decline" of PC gaming. Technology is amazing these days and will only get better and faster every day. Personally, I think PC

gaming can only get better as more technology is introduced.

Brian Mock

There are more than a few reasons that revenues are down for PC gaming. One is the switch to subscription-based online games. People who play those will be less inclined to spend money and time on new games. They also will spend time on their subscription-based game to justify their expenditures. Another is the out-of-control cost of upgrading. I personally will not spend more than \$300 for a graphics card or over \$40 for a game.

So you have people stuck playing one

ize that, even with \$600 graphics cards, it's never been cheaper to build a PC. You could add the most expensive videocard in the world to a \$600 PC today and have a powerhouse gaming system that represents a similar relative performance boost to the thousands everyone spent 15 years ago upgrading from a 286 to a 386 or 486. —ed

Star Wars Galaxies

The Applied Game Theory article on *Star Wars Galaxies* hit on what a lot of gamers and fans have been saying about it. But it appears that Sony Online Entertainment is in denial; actually, they have been this way for a long time.

What I'm talking about is their forums. They have a tendency to delete posts that have any negative content. In fact, they've deleted a post from one of the development team members. Additionally, they perma-ban anyone who is in disagreement about the direction they are heading.

This is part of the reason that veterans of SWG have hit so many review sites and posted negative reviews. SOE refuses to even acknowledge that there's a problem.

papa-r

Errata

In the March issue, we gave an incorrect release date for *Lord of the Rings Online*. It is currently scheduled for release in the last quarter of 2006. Also, the developer of *Star Command* is Worlds-Apart Productions.

We regret the errors.

Gary Van Heusden

As an old-school PC gamer, you have to real-



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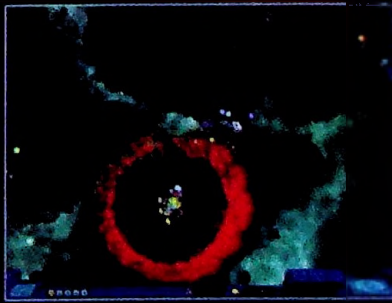
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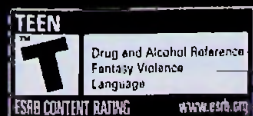
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SPEAK OUT MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD

The Right to Copy

By Eyal Teler

I'm a pretty upstanding world citizen when it comes to copyright abuse. I buy (or legally get for free) all of my software, games, movies, books, and music. Which is why I get annoyed at being treated like a criminal all the time.

I have a Fujitsu P1510D, a tiny sub-notebook that I use mainly for reading and writing on the bus on the way to and from work. I'd love to play a game sometime, but that's far from easy. Games that don't require an Internet connection require a CD in the drive, and since the Fujitsu doesn't have an internal CD drive, there's no way I can play them.

I recently corresponded about this problem with Enlight regarding *Trackmania Sunrise*. I bought the game because of the good review in this magazine and figured it would be a perfect



"I get annoyed at being treated like a criminal all the time."

game to play on the laptop because of its simple controls. Enlight was sympathetic to my plight, referring me to StarForce, the makers of the CD protection system. StarForce gave some canned reply, and when I forwarded it to Enlight they answered, "In view of 'piracy,' it's unlikely for them to satisfy every bypassing request."

Of course, if I really want, I can pay \$40 for a piece of software that can create a CD image good enough to fool copyright protection, and that (plus following relevant instructions found in various forums) will solve the problem for most games. Or I can download no-CD patches from the Internet, if I can find them. But why do I have to resort to such measures? I'd rather be an innocent buyer and not be forced to learn how to crack software just to be able to use it legitimately.

What prompted this column was the comment about HDCP [a copyright protection mechanism required to view HD content on

your PC; some monitors support it, but most videocards do not] in the review of the Gateway FPD2185W 21-inch LCD monitor in the February issue. This is yet another way to inconvenience me, make me pay more money, and perhaps push me to the point where I'll be too tired to buy content I have to create workarounds to use.

Okay, let me stop playing innocent. I admit it, I'm a criminal: I have a large DVD library with a pretty even mix of Region 1 and 2 DVDs (and even one Region 3). There, I've said it. I'm a terrible human being, and I'm even planning (you may want to skip this part so as not to be considered an accomplice to the crime) to buy the Region 1 *Serenity* DVD instead of dutifully waiting for the Region 2 release. [Mr. Teler is in Israel.]

This is why I don't play DVDs on my PC. Years ago I realized that it's much easier to use a dedicated region-free DVD player (which are easy to find) than to coax my PC into not choking on the DVDs I own. That was inconvenient even with a region-free DVD drive.

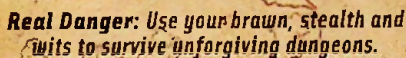
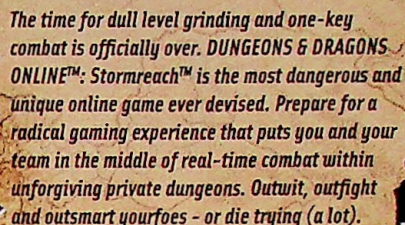
I still have that drive installed on my new PC. It's a 6x DVD drive and still works, and I figured that it's not bad to have two drives (that 6x DVD and a new DVD writer) for when I want to keep a game CD in one drive (so I can play when I want) and still have a free drive to use.

Now, I've read that Windows Vista will not support region-free drives at all. This means that if I upgrade to Vista—which I plan to do—I may not be able to use my old DVD drive. This won't hurt me that much, as I rarely use the second drive. But when you consider that I don't even have DVD-playing software installed on my PC, it feels like a completely unnecessary step to prevent me from the awful crime of playing DVDs from more than one region.

All this really tempts me to give up in anger and start pirating. I probably won't do that, but the more limitations and hurdles are thrown at me, the less likely I am to want to deal with the hassles. I'm not going to replace my current monitor to play HD content, so I'm less likely to purchase HD drives or content. If I'm limited to viewing DVDs from one region, I'll probably buy fewer DVDs.

I hate having to re-download DRM eBooks when I switch PDAs, and even that sometimes requires permission. I hate having to get a new license for downloaded music with DRM restrictions. I believe in adhering to copyright restrictions, but if content publishers don't care at all about my convenience, why should I have any sympathy for them?

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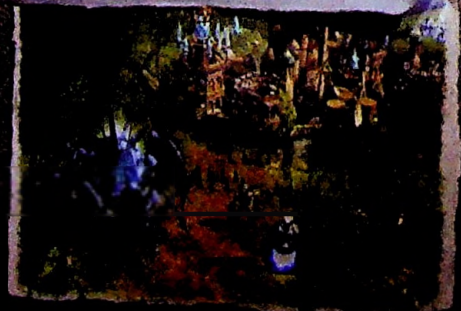
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Secret Agent Man No More!

Will Gordon Freeman finally escape the clutches of the G-Man in *Half-Life 2: Episode One*? BY BRETT TODD

Developer/Publisher Valve Software Release Date April 2006

Ah, the G-Man. Gordon Freeman may be the star of the *Half-Life* series, but this creepy cross between a man in black and a CPA has become an icon in his own right. He fills the enigmatic anti-hero role as ably as the Cigarette Smoking Man from *The X-Files*, manipulating the good guys so ably that you never know which color hat he's wearing.

But that aura of mystery is about to change, thanks to the *Half-Life 2: Episode One* expansion pack that Valve is prepping for release at the end of April. According to designer/programmer Robin Walker, the G-Man won't be pulling Freeman's strings

much longer. "In the original *Half-Life*, the G-Man made Gordon Freeman into a hero," explained Walker. "In *Half-Life 2*, he used you as a tool to accomplish his own agenda. In *Episode One*, however, the G-Man loses control of you."

Now that's as big of a teaser as you'll ever get out of the typically close-mouthed Valve, so treasure it. Aside from that interesting tidbit, little is known about the plot of *Episode One*. Walker only reveals that the expansion picks up where *Half-Life 2* left off, with Freeman rejoining Alyx Vance, the heroine whose gorgeous face has launched a thousand skeezy nude skins, outside the

[left] Good old City 17 is just as picturesque as ever. [bottom left] You just had to know those damned Striders would show up at some point. [below] Barney's back!



PLUG!

Stronghold Legends

Developer Firefly Studios Publisher 2K Games Release Date Fall 2006

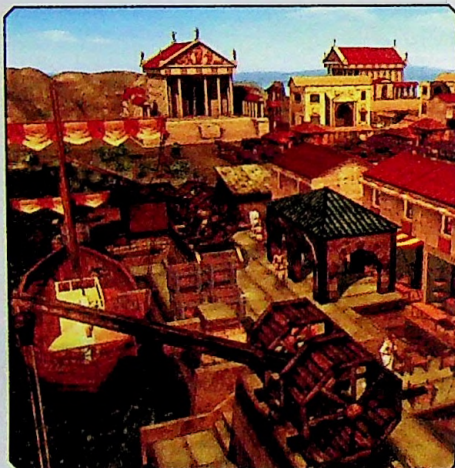
It's Like: *Age of Stronghold*
The Buzz: The *Stronghold* series moves from castle-building sim into the realm of more conventional real-time strategy with *Stronghold Legends*. The last *Stronghold* title wasn't as well-received as its predecessor, so a range of new gameplay options are in order. These will include a new strategic conquest style of play, as well as multiplayer modes, in which you can play as King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, Count Vlad Dracul, or Siegfried of Germany in twenty-four missions that span across three unique campaigns. —Cindy Yans



CivCity Rome

Developer Firefly Studios Publisher 2K Games Release Date Summer 2006

It's Like: *Civilization* meets *SimCity* in Rome. Duh.
The Buzz: Many of the folks that brought you the *Caesar* series for Impressions are springing *CivCity Rome* on the public this summer. As the controller of a Roman city, it's your job to build houses, temples, butchers, wells, and all the necessary buildings and systems that made Roman towns work. Every system has animated interactions: citizens will work half the day, then spend the rest picking up water, meat, or tunics to improve their standard of living. Keep your citizens happy and they won't try to overthrow you. —Alex Handy



Citadel that was about to go kerblooie when the G-Man stuck his nose in again. From there, the pair must travel the ruined streets of City 17, possibly making a stop or two along the way to determine what happened to that Pétain in a lab coat, Dr. Wallace Breen.

Content will be enhanced through "leveraging" the high-dynamic lighting effects and director's-cut commentary of the free *Lost Coast* teaser released via Steam in mid-2005. Walker notes that customer feedback was very positive in regard to both features, so developers have done their best to incor-

porate them into the expansion.

Expect between four and six hours of play. Walker says that Valve has been aiming for this sort of length all along, and that "playtests are tracking very well to that goal." That seems fairly short for an expansion pack, although the *Episode One* package will be beefed up with the original *Half-Life* deathmatch mode ported to the Source engine, and the deathmatch mode from *Half-Life 2*. The expansion won't require *Half-Life 2*, either, so you will actually get a fair bit of game for the estimated \$20 asking price.



And it's not like there won't be more *Half-Life* arriving shortly. Walker confirms that the decision to change the expansion title from its original name, *Aftermath*, to *Episode One* was about more than paying homage to *The Phantom Menace*. Valve is planning a series of episodes, for release both via Steam and traditional retail channels, to continue the story started in *Half-Life 2*. So you can pretty much bank on this add-on ending in yet another cliffhanger.

"*Episode Two* has been in production for some time now, and we'll be revealing more about that soon. The decision to move to episodic releases was made prior to the release of *Half-Life 2* being made available. The idea of producing episodic content is something that's being talked about quite a bit in the industry right now. It makes sense to move in this direction as production



[above] Dr. Kleiner takes a moment out from his ongoing headcrab experiments to have a confab with Alyx. [right] Dark times are ahead for Gordon and Alyx.

times and budgets are increasing, while focus tests are showing that an increasing number of customers are not finishing most of the games they purchase."

Walker is clearly excited about making the move to episodic content. He finds that this style of development offers a "more immediate reward" for gamers, as it allows designers "to drill deeper into each scene" and "deliver experiences that are richer in density than non-episodic games." The idea apparently is to move away from the traditional Game, Expansion Pack, Sequel format and advance stories gradually. Of course, it probably doesn't hurt that this opens up a steady stream of revenue for Valve in the process, although Walker prefers to dwell



on the positives, not the negatives.

"With the old format, customers were asked to wait years to play something new, then they were—in most cases—offered an 'expansion' pack that usually did little in the way of actually expanding the product. With episodic releases, developers are freed up from the burden of building a 15+ hour

opus and allowed to focus on a much more manageable amount of content. As a result, with *Episode One*, we're seeing a product that is more advanced and interesting to play than *Half-Life 2*."

More interesting than *Half-Life 2*? That's a bold claim for any expansion pack, even an episodic one. ■

INCOMING

Driven to Succeed

Spend a day at the Spa with **GTR2** BY TRACY BAKER

Developer SimBin Development Team AB Publisher 10Tacle Studios AG Release Date Summer 2006

If you're a fan of racing simulator *GTR*'s fanatical attention to detail, better look in your rear-view mirror. That blur you see is *GTR2*, which is hoping to overtake the original in every way.

You want licensed cars? How about 140, representing every FIA GT and NGT car from such esteemed manufacturers as Ferrari, Porsche, Lotus, and Lister? Looking for tracks to race them on? *GTR2* will offer 28 recreated licensed venues, including the Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps. And, if you really want to prove your love for Spa, there's even a new Prosimus 24-hour challenge that lets you race in that ass-numbing event.

GTR had good graphics, but *GTR2* is set to stun. Sunlight reflects dully from the track surface but glints brightly from freshly waxed vehicles. Specular-reflective technology is used to make reflections from water-slicked tracks look more realistic than ever,

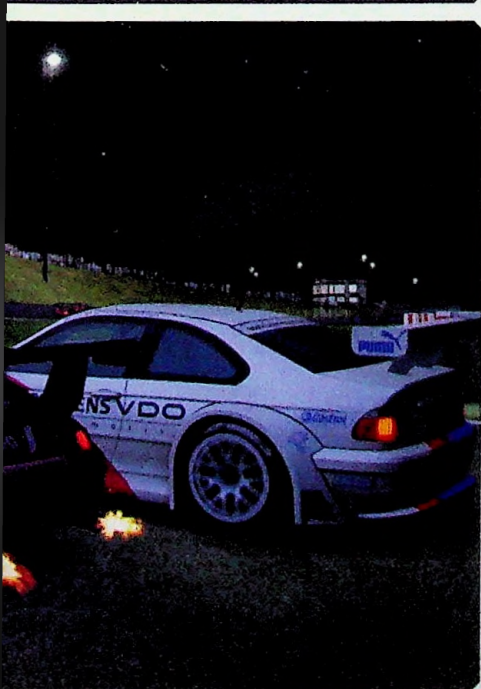
and a revamped particle system complements the already insane damage modeling. During crashes, not only do wheels come off but hoods spring open, fenders get crushed, and it all has an effect on how your car handles, assuming you survive.

A new feature called LiveTrack simulates the accumulation of track and tire debris on the surface of courses during a race. The graphics engine has enough granularity to represent this visually, but the main implication for players is that it reduces tire grip to the point where you can't take surface conditions for granted from lap to lap.

Fortunately, a driving school is included this time to help Sunday drivers over the learning curve, and the hardcore can race online or share ghost recordings to try to best one another's lap times. Unfortunately, it remains to be seen until this summer whether this new sim will simply edge past *GTR* or leave it eating dust. ■

Ooh, look at all of the pretty cars.





BLURB! LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy

Developer Traveller's Tales Publisher LucasArts Release Date Fall 2006



It's Like: Attack of the Blockheads

The Buzz: Glow-in-the-Darth coup: After the somewhat surprising success of *LEGO Star Wars*, it was no surprise when LucasArts announced its intention to release the sequel across all seven major gaming platforms. *LEGO Star Wars II* adds 50 more playable characters from all of the classic original trilogy movies, many of whom will have distinctive weapons, signature animations, and melee attacks. You can import saved games from the original so that you'll be able to use the characters you already unlocked. This comic take on *Star Wars* Episodes IV, V, and VI will also include player vehicles and mounts. And as Yoda might say, an advanced mode it will also have. —Cindy Yans

Halo 2

Developer Bungie Publisher Microsoft Game Studios Release Date Fall 2006

It's Like: Halo 2, in HD

The Buzz: Microsoft has finally announced that *Halo 2* (Xbox version pictured) will be making its way to PCs this fall, with one very big catch: it will require Windows Vista. It will offer the exact same single-player campaign, and multiplayer will include the additional maps offered with the *Halo 2 Multiplayer Map Pack* add-on. It will also include an editor that allows people to create their own levels. —Steve Bauman



INCOMING

BLURB! Crysis

Developer Crytek Publisher Electronic Arts Release Date 2007

It's Like: HaloCry

The Buzz: Electronic Arts released the first images from *Crysis*, the next game from *FarCry* developer Crytek. Scheduled for release some time in 2007, it sounds a bit like Crytek's previous game, only with more aliens. It promises the same AI challenges, customizable weapons and armor, and ungodly numbers of amazing shots like the ones here from the CryENGINE 2. —Steve Bauman





Europa Universalis III

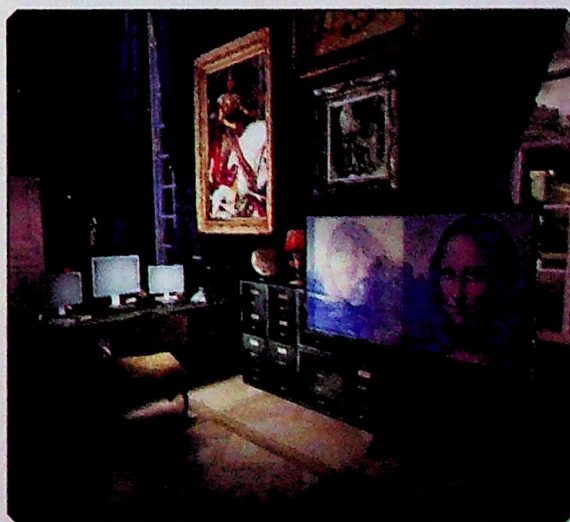
Developer/Publisher Paradox Interactive Release Date Spring 2006

It's Like: The World Hates You
The Buzz: The critically acclaimed *Europa Universalis II* is considered by many a more hardcore version of *Civilization*. The next version, cleverly named *Europa Universalis III*, still features the same emphasis on exploration, trade, warfare, and diplomacy among various nations. The new edition scales back the timeline a bit, and Paradox says it's not simplifying the core gameplay; instead, it's trying to make it more accessible through better tutorials and a gentler learning curve. —Steve Bauman



The Da Vinci Code

Developer The Collective Publisher 2K Games Release Date May 2006



It's Like: Tom Hanks With a Mullet
The Buzz: Holy Grail, Batman! Control an animated Tom Hanks as he portrays Robert Langdon in this mystery action-adventure based on Dan Brown's best-selling novel. Revolving around secret societies, ancient cover-ups, and calculated vengeance, the gameplay should encompass everything you'd hope for in a movie tie-in. While you won't get Hanks, you will get Charles Cecil, seasoned creator of the *Broken Sword* series (which ain't half bad). His connection as creative consultant could save the day. Or... can you say "seeded womb"? —Cindy Yans

INCOMING

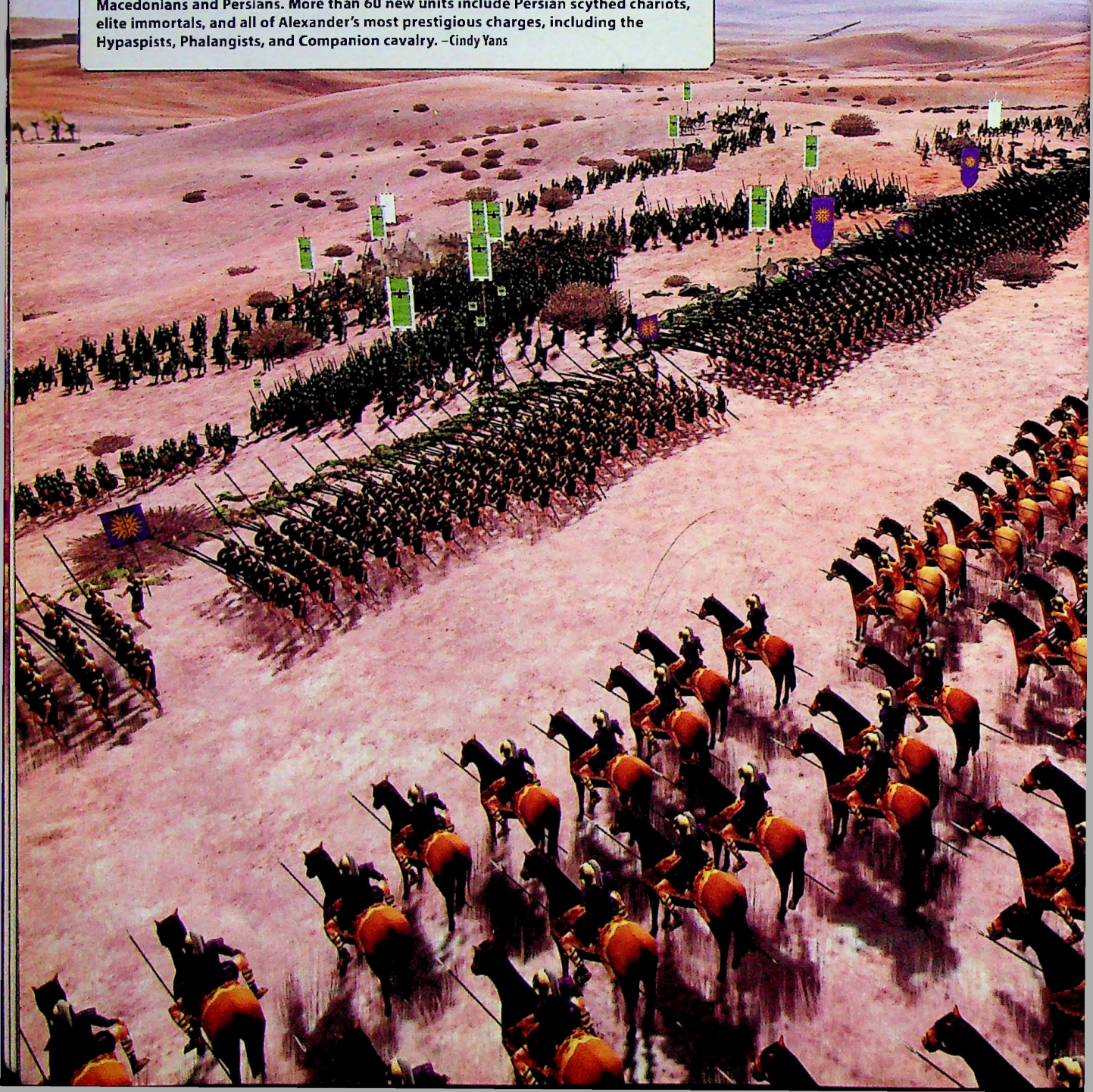
BLURB!

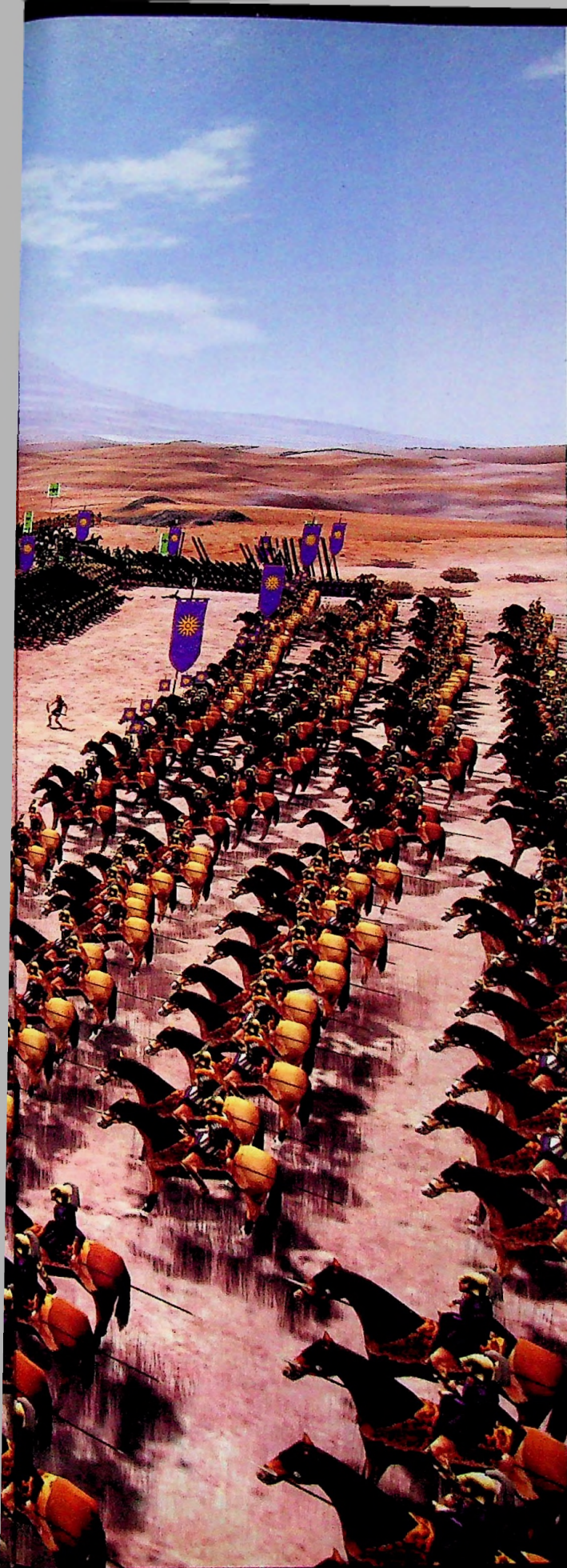
Rome: Total War — Alexander

Developer Creative Assembly Publisher SEGA Release Date Summer 2006

It's Like: Rome: Colin Farrell Edition

The Buzz: Totally Coliseum-azing! The success of *Rome: Total War* precipitated yet another expansion following *Barbarian Invasion*. *Alexander* will be available exclusively for digital download from sega.com, totalwar.com, and sega-europe.com, and predicts more than 30 hours of gameplay. It features a new campaign map that takes Alexander from the unification of Greece to his conquest of the Persian Empire. Six new single- and multiplayer historical battles will cover his triumphs against Greek, Persian, and Indian forces; and four new factions have been added, including the Macedonians and Persians. More than 60 new units include Persian scythed chariots, elite immortals, and all of Alexander's most prestigious charges, including the Hypaspists, Phalangists, and Companion cavalry. —Cindy Yans





Flight Simulator X

Developer ACES Studios Publisher Microsoft Release Date Fall 2006

It's Like: Xtreme Flight Simulator, Dude

The Buzz: Before games were even a true adult hobby, there was *Microsoft Flight Simulator*, a toy that separated the men from the boys, devoted to the "flight sim guys." Over 20 years later, here it still is, with an intact fan base that never quit and the hope of attracting more by refocusing. For one thing, this game cares more about the glitz than the pits (cockpits, that is). It will also take full advantage of Windows Vista and the latest Windows gaming hardware. Finally, for the first time, it's very devoted to mission-based play. They're including more than 24,000, with coverage extending to every continent, focusing on a select number of high-detail airports and adding a new level of "interactivity" for the add-on folks. -CY



INCOMING

HANDS-ON

Ships & Sails & Sea Dogs, Two!

Akella sails the bounding main again with
Age of Pirates: Caribbean Tales BY CINDY YANS

Developer Akella Publisher Playlogic Release Date 2006

Yarr! There, that's out of the way. You can't write anything about a pirate game without at least one "Yarr!" Oops, that's two. And two is fitting, as Akella's newest scurvy dog simulator, *Age of Pirates: Caribbean Tales*, is sort of a dual sequel, a follow-up to both *Sea Dogs* and the movie tie-in game *Pirates of the Caribbean*. In fact, the earliest mentions of the game, released to the public some time ago, carried the moniker *Sea Dogs II*.

From playing around with a prerelease copy, one can conclude that the game stands well enough on its own. It's gorgeous, like most games from Akella, and it supports multiplayer pirate battles. It has an open-ended structure that, while not quite *Grand Theft Pinnacle*, still leaves you with a lot of freedom to expropriate people's stuff, romance the locals, and generally yo-ho-ho it up. You can play as your typical rakish lad or a saucy nautical wench with plenty of cleavage, and the range of game settings is quite extensive, from controlling the sophistication of the AI, to altering the hostility of your competitors, to manipulating the various details of sail handling and cannon loading. The English, Dutch, Spanish, French, and, of course, pirates are available as starting allegiances.

As you run through Guadeloupe with soon-to-be-pirates, two things became immediately clear: 1) The game is beautiful, and 2) it has strong console roots. You control much of the in-port action via icons, which are still controlled by the keyboard, with the mouse standing in for an analog stick, controlling your view. Still, it works, and you can go instantly to any of the necessary shore locations without having to navigate through the admittedly very attractive townscape. Townsfolk with excla-



[above left] Nice butt-resses. [left] Lots of options for the pirate-to-be. [above] Drawing a bead on the enemy in first-person mode.

mation points above them (*World of Warcraft* must have ripped this off) offer tips or advice, and each location has someone you can trade, bargain, or chat with. So far, pretty standard stuff.

Where *Age of Pirates* really shines, though, is at sea. The views are astounding. Akella has a knack for seafaring engines, and this iteration is no exception. The waves roll, the clouds billow, the seagulls produce guano... er, okay, perhaps it's not that realistic, but it is pretty amazing. You can com-

mand from a high third-person view above your ship, taking in the surrounding area, which is great for attacking other ships, or you can go down on deck with a push of the Tab key and wander around your ship for a swabbie's-eye view. You can even see the dolphins swimming beside you. In combat, the cannon flashes; the smoke, and the ship and sail damage add tremendously to the experience. It even looks good when you, ahem, ram another ship, sinking both of you to Davy Jones' locker. The wind mat-



"Where Age of Pirates really shines is at sea. Akella has a knack for seafaring engines, and this iteration is no exception."

ters, and the sails on the ships even billow in the appropriate direction.

Like earlier Akella offerings, this one has a nice role-playing element, with extensive options for customizing your ship, your character, and your crew. You get missions, experience random encounters—I came across three Dutch ships beset by two pirate vessels, for instance, and dove into the fray—and generally improve your standing in the world as you advance the plot line. Or

not—you really don't have to do much beyond sailing, fighting, and plundering if you don't want to.

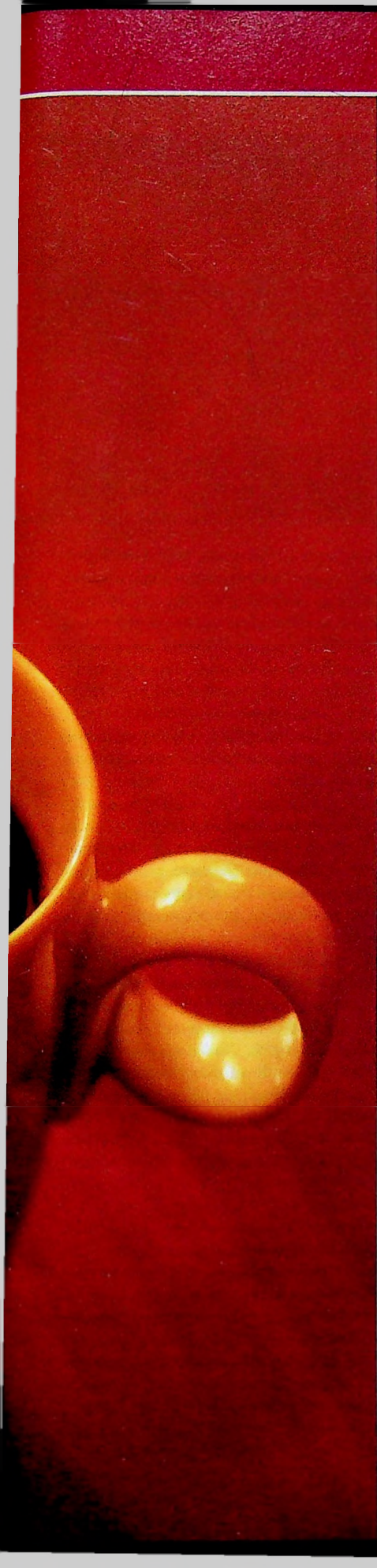
In this build, controls were somewhat obscure in places, and the various views were inconsistent. It's not that clear how you target other ships; in the third-person view while at sea, you can see your crew running about reloading cannons, but in the first-person deck view, they are mysteriously absent. And of course the voices, at this stage,

are still in that traditional pirate cant known as "Russian," although that will be changed before release in North America.

Even in this neonatal form, *Age of Pirates* imparts a great feeling of freedom and exhilarating exploration, backed up by wonderful visuals and some satisfying sea battles. If the control awkwardness and other oddities get worked out, and if the adventure/RPG portion holds its own, it may be well worth the time of any pirate wannabes out there—so long as you don't have a religious aversion to games that clearly reveal their console affiliations. ■

NEWSWIRE





Coffee Grounds

Nearly a year after Hot Coffee, the president of the ESRB, Patricia Vance, talks about ratings and mods BY BRETT TODD

Nearly a year has passed since the "Hot Coffee" uproar over *Grand Theft Auto San Andreas* spilled onto front pages across America, and the reverberations still haven't died down. Although *Grand Theft Auto* is still one of the top franchises in gaming, and publisher Rockstar remains an industry leader, Senators Hillary Clinton and Joe Lieberman, attorney/antigame activist Jack Thompson, and a host of state legislators continue to circle around the sex-and-violence-in-videogames issue like buzzards.

It goes without saying that the gaming industry hasn't quite been the same since a mod unlocked an X-rated Easter egg showing Carl Johnson "having a cup of coffee" with his girlfriends (somehow this involved sex). To get a fuller understanding of the ongoing controversy and the consequences that it holds for game ratings, game content, and the mod community, we recently had a wide-ranging conversation with Patricia Vance, president of the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), the group that issues the ratings for games.

Looking back, would you view Hot Coffee as a one-time freak occurrence, or was it something that has caused the ESRB to change its ratings policies? Are you more stringent now?

The ESRB exists to ensure that consumers have accurate and reliable information with which to make an educated purchase decision. Throughout its history, the rating system has been periodically enhanced and improved to make certain that we are serving parents effectively, and sometimes that means updating or changing ratings policies.

The Hot Coffee event was an unprecedented and highly unusual occurrence, but it did effect a change in our policies. In that sense it had a positive impact on the system. From that point on, ESRB amended the rules for disclosure to require that publishers include in their submission any pertinent content that will exist on the final game disc, whether coded to be accessible to the player or not.

For parents to be able to trust our ratings, they need to be confident that they won't be taken by surprise by content, as we all were in the case of Hot Coffee. That's why, simply put, if content that would affect a rating is on the game disc, it *must* be considered in the assignment of that rating to ensure its accuracy.

Messages seem to be a little mixed where mods are concerned now. What is the ESRB policy on user-made content? Can publishers be held liable and games re-rated like *San Andreas* for what users do with their games?

First and foremost, the record should be set straight regarding exactly what Hot Coffee was, and why ESRB took the actions that it did in that case.

Through its investigation, ESRB determined that the code for the Hot Coffee scenes existed in a fully rendered, unmodified form on all three platform versions of the

game released to the public (PC, Xbox, and PS2). The mod, which served to unlock the previously undisclosed scenes on the PC version of the game, was made freely and broadly available on the Internet. Subsequently, console accessories for the PS2 provided access to the modified code as well.

Once we confirmed that the previously undisclosed scenes were intact on the shipped discs, ESRB raters reviewed the original submission of the game with the newly disclosed scenes and assigned an AO (Adults Only 18+) rating along with a Nudity content descriptor for the new scenes only, maintaining the original M-rating for the previously disclosed content. This discrepancy indicated that the accuracy and integrity of the original M-rating had been undermined, and resulted in the ESRB's revocation of that rating until new versions could be manufactured and shipped without the Hot Coffee content.

To answer your question, the ESRB has no oversight over third parties that modify

videogames and share their mods with other players, nor can we hold publishers accountable for the actions of those individuals. It is up to publishers to protect the integrity of their intellectual prop-



"For parents to be able to trust our ratings, they need to be confident that they won't be taken by surprise by content, as we all were in the case of Hot Coffee." —Patricia Vance

erty, as is done for other forms like film, TV, music, and books. The ESRB simply and quite reasonably encourages publishers to be vigilant when it comes to game modifications that undermine the integrity of a rating.

So is the ESRB taking into account the difference between a mod that creates mature content and a mod that simply unlocks data already on the game disc, provided by the publisher? Or distinguishing between mods created with publisher-provided editors and those created by en-



Gangsta Carl Johnson "having a cup of coffee" with one of his girlfriends.

terprising gamers with patience and skill at breaking into source code?

ESRB oversight is limited to the publishers that submit their games to be rated, so if the content in question is created by the publisher and contained on the game disc, and that content would have affected the assignment of a rating or content descriptor, then the game may be re-rated if necessary to ensure accuracy.

That being said, we realize that many mods introduce user-generated content into a game, and ESRB cannot hold publishers accountable for the independent actions of third parties. We can only encourage publishers to do what they can to ensure that the ratings assigned to their products remain accurate and reliable after they are released.

After all, put yourself in the shoes of a parent. You give a Teen-rated game to your son unaware that mods are available that could change or add content to the game that you would deem unsuitable. You trusted the rating on the box when you bought it. Who's accountable for the fact that your son is now playing a game that is quite different from the one you OK'd when purchased?

Where does the ESRB draw the line now? Is there really a difference between *San*

***Andreas*, which Rockstar sold with "hidden" sexual content on the game discs, and, say, something like *The Sims II*, which has code that can be readily manipulated to create the same sort of sexual content?**

First of all, "readily manipulated" is a loaded term, so let's be clear. If content is manipulated by a modder, it falls beyond the scope of ESRB's oversight. Secondly, it's important to keep in mind that the "line" between rating assignments you are referring to is not necessarily drawn by ESRB, but is largely dependent on the judgment of the raters that review each game. That said, games are just computer programs, ones and zeros that will always be prone to being manipulated in various ways.

The *San Andreas* case was unique in that the code which was manipulated did not introduce anything new into the game or change content that was already there, as is typical of mods. What it did do was unlock a fully rendered, publisher-created, previously undisclosed, highly pertinent and explicit sex scene and allow players to participate. As a result, the initial rating assigned was found to be inaccurate, and so it was changed accordingly.

Has the ESRB been working with publishers in the aftermath of Hot Coffee to keep them in the know about any possible changes to the ratings process? Or do you still handle each game on an individual basis?

ESRB communicates regularly with publishers to keep them informed about the rating system and to let them know if any policy changes have been made.

Does this mean that developers and publishers simply have to be more careful now? Should they be looking at locking down code, or even stopping the distribution of official editors, to make sure that their ratings don't tip over into something that the ESRB would consider AO?

It's not the place of ESRB to dictate how publishers should create or protect their products. However, being careful is certainly in their best interests, not to mention those of parents, consumers, and the industry as a whole. I don't think publishers have any interest in suffering the consequences of ESRB revoking a rating assigned to one of their games because of undisclosed content.

Are you aware of any publishers who have made changes to game design as a result of Hot Coffee? Have you had to warn any publishers about possible AO-ratings, or unwanted M-ratings, due to open content or Easter-egg style content that could be accessed via mods?

First, let me clarify that ratings are assigned, not negotiated. Publishers submit their games to us, and if they choose not to accept the rating issued by ESRB they are entitled to revise and re-submit that game, at which point the rating process starts over from the beginning. ESRB is not involved in publisher activities at the game design level; publishers submit a product, we rate it.

With regard to the question, our chief concern is that we are provided with *all* game content that is pertinent to a rating so that the raters can make a fully informed decision and the resulting rating is accurate. Ratings have always taken into account all relevant content, whether accessed through cheat codes, locked levels, or Easter eggs. Publishers know this, and are legally bound to disclose it all or face the consequences if they do not.

How would you sum up the whole Hot Coffee controversy? Bad thing for gaming? Or is it another step in the maturation process, a necessary step as games become more and more a part of mainstream pop culture and inevitably attract more government attention, just as movies did during the Hays Code era and comic books did during the 1950s?

Hot Coffee stands for different things to different people. Some paint it as evidence of a failure on the part of the industry to self-regulate, but people who truly understand what took place know that not to be the case.

Videogames are unlike other forms of media and entertainment, and, to your point, it takes time for new media to be understood and gain acceptance across generations. It's typical for one generation to misunderstand and rebel against the culture of the next, and that certainly played a role in the controversy surrounding Hot Coffee propagated in the media by opportunistic politicians and advocacy groups.

At the end of the day, though, Hot Coffee was a case where the ESRB acted swiftly, decisively, and unquestionably in the interests of consumers and the game industry as a whole. Our actions were measured and necessary and served to rectify an unprecedented and complicated situation. And if it brought attention to the ratings by sending the message to parents that videogames are deserving of their attention and discretion, then that is the silver lining of what was otherwise a highly unusual and unfortunate event. ■



No Comment

To many in the industry, Hot Coffee doesn't seem to exist

In a perfect world, this would be the place to read about developers' and publishers' reactions to Hot Coffee and how they have or have not changed their design policies in the wake of last summer's controversy. Unfortunately, it seems like the financial hit that Rockstar incurred after the ESRB re-rated *San Andreas* last year, plus the continuing scrutiny of certain U.S. senators, still has game companies a bit skittish.

Basically, nobody wants to talk about Hot Coffee.

Electronic Arts was the only company to give any sort of detailed response to repeated queries, and that brief statement consisted of little more than standard corporate-speak divorcing the publisher from any responsibility for what users do with its games.

"All software—from office programs to games—gets hacked/modded," said EA spokesperson Trudy Muller. "Our fans are incredibly sophisticated computer users; they've got great imaginations and they're used to interacting with the software. So there's little we can or should do to restrict mods."

And that's about it. Activision turned down our request to be a part of this story. Ubisoft never responded to inquiries. Rockstar, the developer that got the coffee brewing in the first place, dropped the cone of silence and stopped replying to e-mails about this topic after an initially positive reaction.

So, is there really nothing to see here? Or is the issue still such a sensitive one that they've adopted a "silence is golden" philosophy? The Family Entertainment Protection Act, authorizing the Federal Trade Commission to look into the ESRB ratings process, is still being shepherded through U.S. Senate committees by senators Hillary Clinton and Joe Lieberman. And multiple states are still pressing the violent-games hot button and introducing legislation criminalizing the exposure of minors to sexually explicit and/or violent games.

Given the above, it's hard to believe that game publishers aren't watching this situation closely and taking more care with game content than ever before. Still, since it's not as if they have anything to gain by discussing their precautions with the media, it remains anyone's guess what is or isn't actually taking place behind the scenes.

NEWSBYTES



Prostitutes Call for Ban on Grand Theft Auto—Really, there's little more than needs to be said about this topic than the headline, but here goes. The Sex Workers Outreach Project USA (SWOP), a group "dedicated to improving the lives of sex-industry workers and to the promotion of a safe working environment for the industry," is calling on all parents and gamers to boycott *Grand Theft Auto* because it "accrues points to players for the depiction of rape and murder of prostitutes." Making this even more surreal, the group quotes the National Institute on Media and the Family, the famously conservative group that's equally bullish on the whole "ban games" thing. So why isn't AARP calling for a ban because *GTA* lets you kill old people? ... **Smoking Böll**—

"Filmmaker" Uwe Böll is pissed off at game publishers. In an interview with Eurogamer, the "director" of *BloodRayne*, *Alone in the Dark*, *House of the Dead*, and the upcoming *Dungeon Siege* movie, complained that

he gets no support for his movies from game companies. "They count on the fact that the movie will support the game sales, but they're not willing to spend any money in cross-promoting anything. ... They are happy to sell the license, but then they don't give a shit about it, and this is not the right approach." He's right, but maybe things would be different if the movies didn't suck.... **Writer Writes**—Codemasters has signed "experienced science fiction screenwriter" James Swallow to handle

Move Over, GI Joe

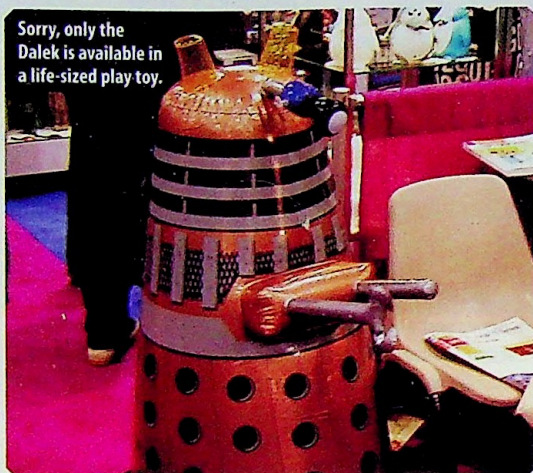
A Toy Fair 2006 report from the front lines

After a three-year split, Barbie and Ken look to be patching things up, no doubt in part thanks to Ken's new metrosexual look. Barbie's boy toy showed off his new style prior to the annual New York International Toy Fair in February, but he'd better hope he doesn't get called up for action. For that matter, GI Joe continues to look rather soft compared with the many soldiers that reported for duty this year. A real American hero?

While WWII figures have been waging battle for years now—longer, in fact, than it took for the Allies to beat down Nazi Germany—it seemed that several companies were beginning new offensives with 1/6-, 1/18-, and 1/32-scale figures, vehicles, and play sets. Plan B Toys will be rolling out new figures based on Ubisoft's *Brothers in Arms* franchise while continuing to fill its ranks with *Call of Duty* figures. Who says it has to be a competition when you're fighting the war with the "Greatest Generation"?

Dragon Models, Bluebox/bbi, and 21st Century Toys remain the major players in the WWII arena, and each has continued to release dozens of figures and vehicles. This year, we'll see even greater detail in their models' uniforms and equipment and an

Sorry, only the Dalek is available in a life-sized play toy.



even more diverse selection of soldiers, including Italian infantrymen and paratroopers, a Cossack volunteer to the Wehrmacht, and a few more American Marines.

Military toys aren't the only action figures bent on world domination. With *Doctor Who* making a comeback (a new series aired on the BBC last year and will hit American TV this year), a new line of remote control Daleks will soon be invading living rooms. A 12-inch talking Doctor Who—the fourth regeneration in the guise of Tom Baker—will be on hand as well. But the sci-fi geek that has it all should look for a life-sized inflatable Dalek. There's no word on whether any of the Doctor's female companions will be available in inflatable form. —Peter Suci

QUOTABLES



"You can do many professions in *World of Warcraft*, like mining, smiting, leather working, engineering, etc."

—A typo at the Christian Answers Network adds an interesting new wrinkle to this particular MMO.

"Absolutely not! I don't know why Uwe Böll is even talking about this kind of thing. We've never talked to him. It's impossible that we'd ever do a movie with him."

—*Metal Gear Solid* creator Hideo Kojima on the rumors of "filmmaker" Uwe Böll working on a movie version of his game.

The 10 Best Games of All Time



People are always debating the "best ever," but it's hard to come up with a proper formula for determining quality. Individual publications and websites have their own ratings systems, and some even use complex formulas designed to distill a game's essence into a single number.

But they're getting it all wrong. There's a simple way to compare games: *Scrabble* word scores. We've taken 10 of the top-rated games of the last 10-15 years and put them through this rigorous test to see which one comes out on top*.

- 1 No One Lives Forever 2: A Spy in H.A.R.M.'s Way (56)
- 2 Sid Meier's Civilization IV (43)
- 3 Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn (41)
- 4 The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind (39)
- 5 Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (33)
- 6 World of Warcraft (30)
- 7 System Shock 2 (25)
- 8 Age of Empires II (22)
- 9 EverQuest (21)
- 10 Quake (18)

Also-rans: Unreal Tournament 2004 (18), Half-Life 2 (17), X-COM (15), SImCity (14), Deus Ex (14), The Sims (12), Myst (9), DOOM (7)

* No double or triple word scores were involved in the computations.

DESERT ISLAND DISCS

You're stuck on a desert island. There's no Internet, but there apparently is coconut-powered electricity. You can't train monkeys to play LAN games. So what five games do you bring?

Beyond foraging for food, building shelter, and talking to various volleyballs named Wilson, I would want to play the games that I have spent the most hours playing.

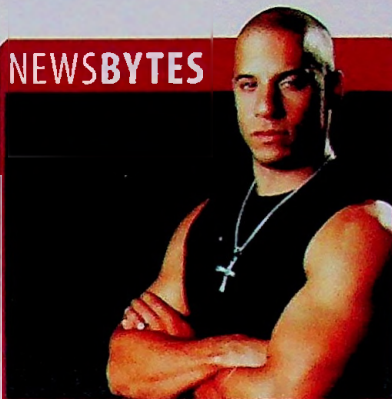
Medieval Total War is the game I play the most; I love the fact that I play a different nation and the whole game changes. **Grand Theft Auto San Andreas** is a game I would play just to mess around. **Unreal Tournament 2004** is just a great first-person shooter to play, and the bots are challenging. **Counter Strike Source's** bots aren't usually challenging, but it's close to human competition.

In the last game, **Conflict: Middle East**, it's your job to defend Israel against its neighbors. Unlike in other games, you really don't have a shot in hell at winning, so when you do win, it's a great joy. I've played this simple game for days' worth of time and I've never had the same game twice. If you can find it, I would suggest you try it.

-Paul Backer

Send your own lists and comments to editor@cgonline.com

NEWSBYTES



the storyline for its upcoming strategy game *Maelstrom*. Swallow's credits include episodes of *Star Trek Voyager* and *Doctor Who*.... **Synergy!**—It's a movie! It's a game! It's *Wheelman*, a newly announced game from Midway and Tigon Studios, actor Vin Diesel's game company. MTV Films and Paramount Pictures are producing the film, which stars Diesel as a wheelman who comes out of retirement to protect a "woman from his past." This is the second of three games in a relationship between MTV and Midway to "market, jointly sell in-game advertising, and collaborate on soundtrack development," the three most critical parts of any game....

Russia is Full of Aliens—Cenega Publishing has signed a deal with Altar Games for another entry in the UFO series, this one called *Afterlight*. It's scheduled for release in early 2007.... **Tapped into Heroes**—GameTap has added the entire *Might and Magic* series to its service, the role-playing and strategy games. So if you want to stick your heads in the *Clouds of Xeen* or fight *The Succession Wars* again, you know where to go....

Blunt Gaming

League—Snoop Dogg has announced the Hip-Hop Gaming League, one open only to "A-list" entertainers and pro athletes. These famous people include Method Man, Carmelo Anthony, Cobi Jones, and Chad Johnson. "We're going to take this thing here straight over the stratosphere, baby," said the rapper formerly known as Calvin Broadus...



GHOST



WORLD

ALIENS AND NATIVES

ORGANIC AND STEEL

UPSIDE DOWN, INSIDE OUT, AND DEAD-ALIVE

THE MANY PARADOXES OF **PREY**

BY TOM CHICK

There probably hasn't been a spaceship like this since *System Shock 2*. The idea is that it's a living organism growing out of control. The inhabitants of the ship have to build a structure inside to keep it at bay. It's all metal and goo, alternately wet and glistening, or silver and straight. Tendrils punch through the walls and catwalks span yawning fleshy pits.

"The idea is that [the aliens] are going from world to world and grabbing people to integrate them and their technology into the ship," says Chris Rhinehart. You discover all this in the opening of *Prey*, during a *Half-Life*-style tram tour. But you're not on any tram. You're bolted to a rack and being carried through the ship like the side of meat you're about to become.

A sort of valve opens up and spits out red viscera. "We call those vomit-tors," Rhinehart says. "That's a sphinc-door," he explains when a membrane unpuckers to let you through.



Look at that Harvester there, the texturing, the lighting, the detail. Amazing! (For the love of God, don't look at the wall.)

IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

Rhinehart is the project lead on *Prey*, which takes place almost entirely inside this malevolent alien ship. The developers at Human Head have tried to wrestle the DOOM 3 engine into something other than your standard-issue space dungeon corridors. At times, the whole thing opens out into some large rooms that will disabuse people of assumptions they may have about this engine based on what it's done previously. At one point, you're flying around a small asteroid kept inside a huge hangar. It's like something out of *Descent*.

There's a sort of consistent sense of place, not just in terms of the big, wet Borgness of the ship. It actually seems to have a bit of geography that you can see in *Prey*'s menu screen, as well as in certain places during the game. You're inside a big ball, with something glowing in the center.

"Do you know what a Dyson sphere is? It's sort of the

geek test. That's one of the first things I ask when I give a demo," says 2K Games' Jason Bergman. If you're not a geek, you may not know that a Dyson sphere is a megastructure built completely around an energy source, like a star, at its center.

NATIVE HISTORY

Prey isn't just a game. It's a 10-year saga that's been part of 3D Realms lore nearly as long as *Duke Nukem Forever*. There are two core concepts that have been consistent throughout its history of development, cancellation, and development. The first is its premise: a Native American gets abducted by aliens.

The first thing you see when *Prey* starts is a view of someone talking to you about what a loser you are. Wait. That's you, looking at yourself in the mirror. It's a sort of teaser for the way Human Head plays with perspective throughout the game. Looking around, you

LOOKING AROUND, YOU SEE YOU'RE IN A DINGY BATHROOM WITH INTERACTIVE TOILETS AND SINKS. THIS IS, AFTER ALL, A 3D REALMS GAME.



see you're in a dingy bathroom with interactive toilets and sinks. This is, after all, a 3D Realms game. The ladies' room isn't much better, because you know you're going to walk in there. "Sugar and spice, my ass," the lead character says to himself.

As the character introduction continues, you find out you're playing Tommy, a Cherokee who thinks spirituality is all "superstitious bullshit." There's the barmaid, Jennifer, who is Tommy's girlfriend and will lead him through the alien ship. She's bolted to a rack and carried along a system of rails. And then there's Tommy's grandfather, a shaman figure who will introduce many of the game's concepts.

"Tommy's character arc is one of accepting his responsibility, embracing his grandfather's message, his people's heritage," says 3D Realms' Scott Miller, who has also called the game a "love story."

Jennifer chides Tommy for leaving his dirty tools on the bar. He apologizes and picks up his wrench. Now you've got your first weapon, which is soon wet with the blood of a couple of drunk rednecks who insult you. Now you've had your combat tutorial. That's when the aliens strike, sucking up bits of the bar while the juke-



Jenny fights off a bad guy while you stand and watch. What a guy. The mutant guy on the bottom seems have a bit of a problem with his... well, this is a 3D Realms game.



NOT ONLY ARE THERE WALL-WALKING PADS AROUND THE SHIP, BUT THERE ARE PLACES WHERE GRAVITY APPLIES IN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS WITHIN THE SAME ROOM.

box plays Blue Oyster Cult's "Don't Fear the Reaper." You can bet the jukebox will be back. 3D Realms didn't license music from Ted Nugent, Judas Priest, and Heart for nothing.

There are also a few videogames in the bar you probably tried to play with. Yes, they worked. Among them is a video poker machine that you'll run into later on the alien ship. "I couldn't believe it," 3D Realms' George Broussard says. "I was playing through the other day and I got a straight flush. I even grabbed a screenshot." Rhinehart explained that the aliens tinkered with the machine. Everyone gets a straight flush.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

The second core concept behind *Prey* was portals. Dimensional gates would open and aliens would step through. But it was never just an excuse to spawn monsters in midair. Plenty of games do that. In *Prey*, the trick was to let the level designers bend the rules of conventional 3D space.

Human Head has taken this concept to some brain-twisting lengths. In addition to glowing dimensional portals floating in midair, there are boxes that tip over to reveal new rooms inside. There's a small glass cube that you can step into and look back out at the room you were just in, now much bigger. There's a set of dimensional holes that form an Escher-esque circle of connected rooms. And there's you in the one in front of you, watching yourself watching yourself.

"You can actually shoot yourself if you want," Rhinehart says. He does, just to prove it, because it's not the sort of thing you expect someone to actually put in a game. What do you call that? Friendly autofire?

But wait, there's more. If you're going to mess with ideas of space, you might as well do gravity too. Not only are there wall-walking pads around the ship, but there are places where gravity applies in different directions within the same room. If you kill something, it might fall upward or sideways. Push a switch and suddenly the world is sideways or upside down.

"We don't have any ladders in the game," Rhinehart notes.

These shots show examples of portals opening in the middle of a level, allowing you enter a room that couldn't/shouldn't exist without some voodoo magic.



THE DUKE AND I

"We fucked up," George Broussard says. "Basically, we threw everything out and started again."

Spend a half hour with Broussard and you're likely to get at least one of these mea culpas about *Duke Nukem Forever*, which he then proceeds to show. Actually, it's mainly just pieces of the game in progress and tech demos: There's a mock-up of an early level, a vehicle sequence, a few test rooms, and even an AI-driven battle between some familiar characters. But it demonstrates a few things.

The first thing is that *Duke Nukem Forever* is well under way. "We've been tech complete for a year," Broussard says. "The last year has been making the game, putting the pieces together. It's like a carpenter when all the tools are in the tool box and now you just have to build the house."

The second thing is that 3D Realms' trademark sense of humor is still intact. "Duke is a man's man. He drinks. He smokes. He enjoys women." All of which are demonstrated in some form or another. "Every other game that comes out is World War II or dead serious. Duke is about being the ultimate alien ass kicker."

And the third thing is that interactivity is still a big part of what 3D Realms wants to accomplish. A lot of the proof-of-concept stuff consists of Duke just fiddling with things. "You should reward the player for playing with the world," Broussard says as he does just that. At one point, Duke Nukem steps in front of a computer. "What's your e-mail address?" Broussard asks. Duke jots down a note, types in my address, and hits send.

"No way," I say.

"We stopped saying that four years ago," Broussard laughs.

For the most part, Broussard is strangely reserved about the game, even during the demonstration. He keeps referencing an index card with notes on it, and he's continually apologetic about the state of the build. He seems almost nervous, like a kid showing a school project for the first time. "Don't write that down," he implores at one point. "I think that comes across like bragging," he explains, having obviously been burned by what he's said before. *Duke Nukem Forever* is the butt of vaporware jokes, but Broussard says it doesn't bother him anymore.

"The problem is that when we show it, people are going to be like, 'Yeah, whatever.' Honestly, at this point we just want to finish it."

Returning home later that day, I am disappointed to find that I didn't actually get an e-mail from Duke Nukem. It's no big deal, as it's not really an important thing. It's going to be a long time before 3D Realms hits that "when it's done" moment, so they'll have plenty of time to iron out the details. But still, it would have been nice if the company had finally come through with something they've claimed about *Duke Nukem Forever*.

It's only a few days later that I realize I've sold them short again. I'm going through my spam filter and there's a message from DukeNukem@3drealms.com. "You're sitting in the 3D Realms offices checking out *Prey* and DNF!" it reads, just as I'd watched Broussard type with Duke's 3D fingers.



[above] Tommy in the spirit world, and getting advice from his Grandfather in the Land of the Ancients. How Native American. [opposite page] Prey spins you right round, baby, right round like a record baby, right round right round.

SPIRITUALITY

When Human Head came on board as the developer, these gravity tricks were among its contributions to the design of *Prey*. It also brought to the game the concepts of death walking and spirit walking.

Tommy dies early in *Prey*, which would normally make for a short game. But instead, he acquires mystical powers, which are apparently one of the fringe benefits of being a Cherokee lead character. Spirit walking is his ability to step outside his body into a mirror dimension. He's not entirely incorporeal, as he can only pass through energy barriers. He has a mystical bow that uses his "spiritual energy" to attack. The energy can be replenished when he kills an alien. When the energy is

drained, Tommy is snapped back into his body.

Since the alien ship uses proximity doors, Tommy's spirit walking won't let him move from one area to another. But it does offer you an optional stealth approach if you want it. It's also a key component in a lot of puzzles. Rhinehart shows off a big multilevel room with switches, moving platforms, and some ghostly walkways that are only available to your spirit form.

"There are a lot of puzzle rooms like this," Broussard says. "Big setpieces that break up the combat nicely." He says that in many shooters, the combat is the central gameplay and there's not much else. "Combat should be filler between the memorable bits. No one remembers a game as 'So I turned the corner and fought these guys.'"

"WE WANT TO AVOID THAT SHELF MOMENT, WHEN THE GAME GOES BACK ON THE SHELF AND YOU LEAVE IT THERE." —GEORGE BROUSSARD

DEAD MAN WALKING

Tommy's other spiritual ability is death walking, which is Human Head's solution to the traditional quickload/quicksave two-step you do through a lot of shooters. In *Prey*, there is no hard fail state. When you die, you go to a dark limbo where wraiths are flying around you. A representation of your body, which is still back on the alien ship, slowly descends toward a pit that represents the passage back to the physical world. When your body reaches the bottom, you're pulled in with it. Until then, you can shoot wraiths with your bow to refill your health and spirit meters. Or you can just jump into the pit to get right back into the game with a small reserve of health and spirit energy.

"We wanted to take the most frustrating thing about a first-person shooter and turn it into gameplay," says Broussard. "We wanted to address every issue that pisses us off about [them]."

Another way Human Head does this is with "dynamic difficulty adjustment," which is a sort of rubber-banding difficulty level not entirely unlike what's found in the *Max Payne* games (which 3D Realms also helped produce). When you're doing well, the game will gradually ratchet up factors like the damage level, whether aliens try to swipe health packs, and how much ammo is available. When you're doing poorly, it'll back off.

"We want a low-impact game," Broussard explains. "We want to avoid that shelf moment, when the game goes back on the shelf and you leave it there."

ZERO-G MP

The idea behind *Prey*'s multiplayer is to build most of these concepts into deathmatch. You can spirit walk during multiplayer games, but your body will be vulnerable. "We try to have in each map two or three places to hide your body," says Rhinehart, but he explains that the astute player will notice a humming sound effect whenever he passes near an uninhabited body.

You can imagine the fun the level designers had with the portals and the gravity tricks. Rhinehart shows off a level called Spindle Spheres, which features a small asteroid suspended above a larger asteroid. The larger one has hallways built around and through it. It's got an exposed upper end with the smaller asteroid floating above it. Each asteroid has its own gravity. You can pass between them by finding the appropriate portals or by making a well-timed jump.

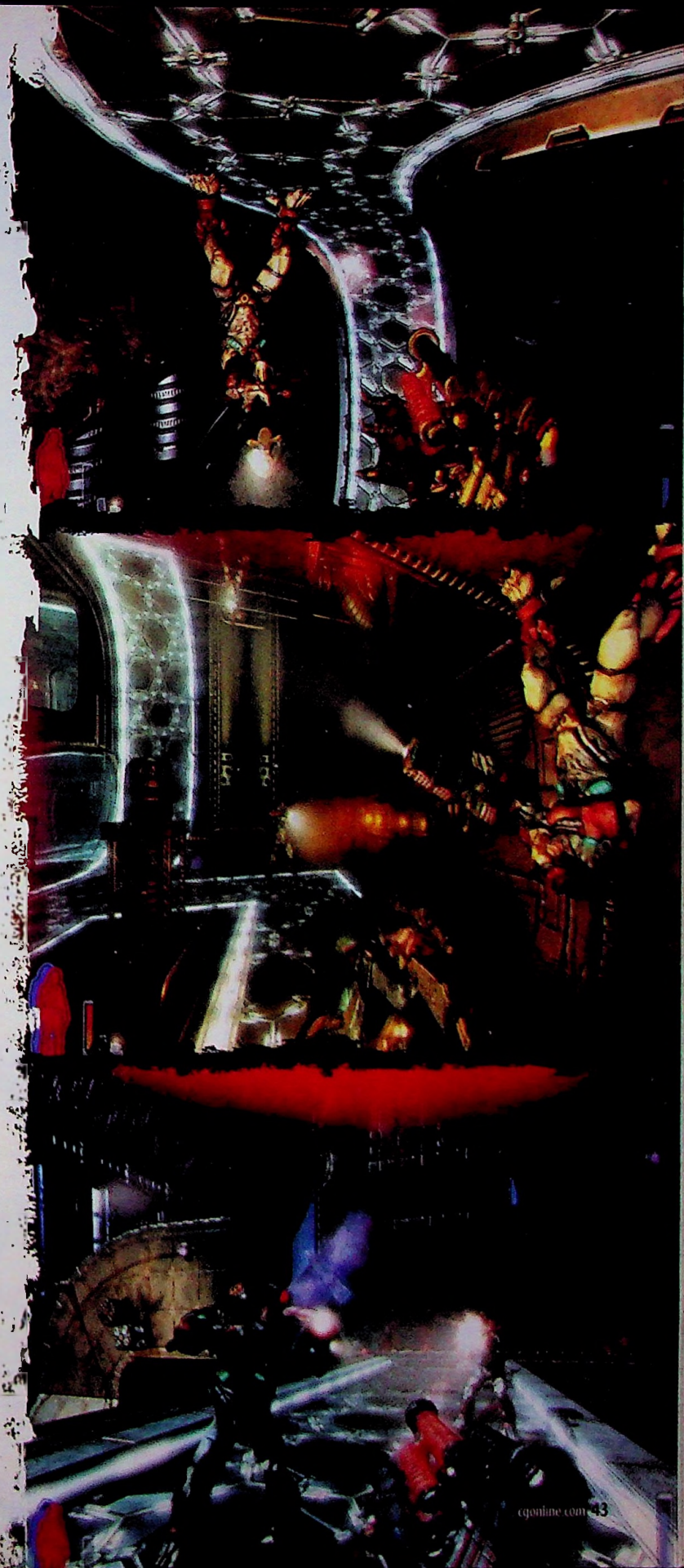
"Spindle Spheres?" Miller asks. "You need a better name for a map with two balls."

This is, after all, a game published by 3D Realms.

"DM-Nuts," Broussard suggests. "Because, you know, it's nuts."

Bergman neatly flips from one asteroid to the other, his character model pivoting as it hops from gravitational pull to gravitational pull.

Nuts indeed. ■



REVIEWS



That's No Moon...



The varied and inventive **Star Wars: Empire at War** shows that you can teach old dogs new tricks BY BENJAMIN E. SONES

★★★★★ 1/2

Genre Real-time Star Wars Strategy **Developer** Petroglyph Games, Inc. **Publisher** Lucasarts **ESRB** Teen **Requirements** 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM

Who would have guessed that some of the most seasoned real-time strategy veterans on the planet would take one of the most well-worn licenses in gaming and turn it into one of the most inventive games in years? The developer is Petroglyph Games, Inc., whose members (in no small part) earned their real-time strategy chops inventing the genre, back in their days at the now-defunct Westwood Studios. The game is *Star Wars: Empire at War*, and it's a bit of a contradiction. It draws a lot of inspiration from games in Westwood's back catalog, like *Command & Conquer* and *Dune II*, and at the same time it plays nothing like those games. Apparently you can teach an old dog new tricks.

It's not so much a real-time strategy game with a grand strategy wrapper as it is a grand strategy game that happens to include real-time combat. The heart of the game in all but the Skirmish mode is a map of the *Star Wars* galaxy that the Empire and the Rebel Alliance fight to dominate. It's a

tricky balancing act. You can build mines and unit production facilities and defenses on the planets that you control, but each planet has limited build slots, and you never get to build everything you want. You need to recruit and maneuver stacks of ships and ground troops to conquer new systems and expand (since you have to control both space and land to own a system), but if you let your borders grow too far, you'll have trouble protecting what you already have. The game's theme could best be summarized thus: simple mechanics, difficult choices.

The combat continues that theme. To take over systems, you build fleets and armies and then send them in to fight battles with your ships in orbit and with your ground troops planetside. The Galactic Map pauses during combat, and this is where the game's *Command & Conquer* roots are most evident. There is an exaggerated "rock, paper, scissors" relationship among the units, and your army requires constant

babysitting to make sure that your infantry isn't getting steamrolled by T4-B Tanks, or that your Y-Wings aren't getting shredded by Tartan Patrol Cruisers. But the system works better here than it did in *Command & Conquer*. You have time to babysit your units, because all the Galactic Map stuff gets put on hold when you fight. You don't have to build units or keep your economy afloat: you can just focus on tactics. *Empire at War* never gives you too many things to juggle at once.

Incidentally, that's why the Skirmish mode is the weakest link in the game. It does offer a shorter multiplayer alternative to the

Conquer the Galaxy mode, but it gives up some of the game's simplicity in the process. The pacing that feels just right when all you have to do is manage your troops gets a little more hectic when you throw some (admittedly simple) research and resource management—and larger maps—into the mix. But only a little.

In the Campaign and Galactic Conquest modes, the space and the land maps are small and focused, and battles are short. In space, opposing forces start off almost within spitting distance. While the maps have various features like asteroid fields that you can sometimes use to your advantage, the space game is not primarily about maneuvering around the map; it's more concerned with maneuvering around the ships. Capital ships and space stations have limited fields of fire for each of their hardpoints, and you can use that feature to your advantage, especially if you can disable their engines (or the hardpoints). Land battles play like Capture the Flag, with the attacker trying to capture enough Reinforcement Points to get a critical mass of troops on the ground and the defender trying to prevent it. The defender can have some big advantages, like free reinforcements (if he built the appropriate buildings on the Galactic Map) and automatic defenses (ditto). Or maybe he built a bunch of mines, which are vital to your economy but useless for defense. Then he's in trouble.

Though it offers only two factions to play, *Empire at War* packs more variety than most real-time strategy games. That's because the factions are entirely asymmetrical; they don't even conduct research in the same way (the Empire builds laboratories, and the Rebels steal technology from the Empire).

[clockwise from opposite page top] Does using the Death Star to blow up Naboo make up for the awfulness of the *Star Wars* prequels? Yeah... a little; Hero units, like Lord Vader, can turn the tide in a fight; The AI sure is... er, good... at constantly shuffling its forces around in real time.





Each of the systems has different strategic benefits, a unique map and terrain, weather patterns (which affect combat), native populations (which may be friendly or hostile to your cause), and even wildlife (which may be dangerous).

Each faction has completely different units that require completely different strategies. But the game still refrains from overwhelming you with too many options, instead opting for a small assortment of well-differentiated units that all remain useful and necessary throughout.

Petroglyph also does a great job making the Rebels feel horribly outmatched without actually making them horribly outmatched. The Empire relies on brute force. It produces enormous, devastatingly powerful ships and vehicles that the Rebels can't equal, and it doesn't even have to buy TIE Fighters and Bombers—the Imperial cruisers spit them out for free during battles.

But the Rebels are like David to the Empire's Goliath. They have scrappier units, with special abilities focusing on defense and subterfuge. The Rebels can send small land armies on raid attacks that bypass orbital fleets, much like the battle on Endor in *Return of the Jedi*. Incidentally, it's amazing how many elements from the films actually "work" in terms of the game mechanics. An Ion Cannon will let you retreat past orbital blockades, Chewie can hijack enemy vehicles, and, while Grand Moff Tarkin increases fleet effectiveness across the board, you can never retreat a fleet that includes him. (Retreat? In our moment of triumph? I think you overestimate their chances.) Every ele-

ment of the game is steeped in *Star Wars* fiction, and the apparent mismatch in strength between the Rebels and the Empire is part of that.

Those strengths and weaknesses are deceptive, though. Take the Y-Wing bombers, which are sort of like the Miner from *Stratego*. They are as sturdy as a glass Christmas tree ornament, but they are also the Rebels' best unit for taking out the big Imperial Cruisers... if you can keep them alive. And, while it might seem unfair that the Empire doesn't have to buy fighters and bombers, it's worth remembering that they also can't buy fighters and bombers. They can only get them on the battlefield by building expensive capital ships, and even then, the Rebels can prevent them from spawning by blowing up the hangar bays. Despite appearances, the factions are very evenly matched through myriad clever checks and balances.

Would it be nice if the AI were a bit less reckless on the Galactic Map, or a bit more aggressive when defending land maps? Or if the game told you what sort of resistance to expect on campaign missions and let you sort your fleets with the game paused (or from the Galactic Map)? Sure. But what would be even nicer is if other developers took a good, hard look at all the things *Empire at War* gets right. And took notes. ■

SWAT 4: The Stetchkov Syndicate

Making the world safe from Eastern Europeans



Genre Here, Have a Few Maps
Developer Irrational Games
Publisher Vivendi Universal ESRB Mature
Requirements SWAT 4

With *The Stetchkov Syndicate*, the bar continues to plummet in terms of how much we can expect in our expansion packs. There's not much new content here, but at least it's pretty good. If you're not sure what to expect from the awkward attempt at a Ludlum-ized title—there must have been a meeting where someone said, "Well, *The Varghina Incident* is taken, so let's go with *The Stetchkov Syndicate*"—here's how it breaks down: seven maps, a handful of so-so toys, and some new multiplayer features.

The name of the expansion pack refers to a gang of indeterminate Eastern Europeans or Russians or something. At any rate, the villains are some Caucasian ethnic group that won't offend anyone. This particular gang is providing firearms to hapless stooges, like farmers protesting genetically altered crops and Christians against rock music, many of whom end up getting shot by you over the course of seven missions. It's an unnecessary and threadbare attempt to connect the missions with a narrative.

The maps begin with a whimper, offering a variation on the amusement warehouse from the original game. Next up is a tenement similar to the tenement in the original game. The difference is that this one has a chapel in it. "Churches always creep me out," one of your teammates says. "That's because you know you've been bad," another teammate says, as if he's ready to



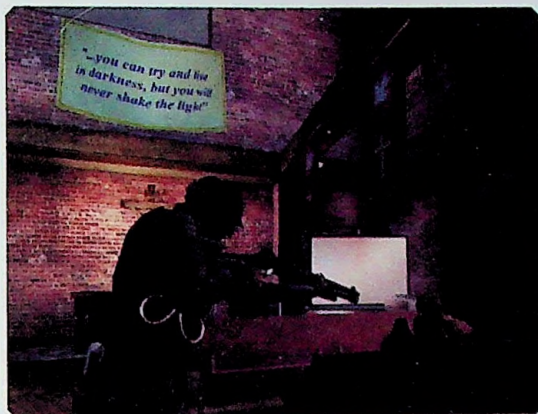
administer a spanking. Ahh, comic relief. Four missions later, the same character points out that there's nothing funny about the mayhem and violence. They grow up so fast, don't they?

After the chapel tenement, the maps hit their stride. Irrational is clearly having a bit of fun, and it shows in the next few missions. They're every bit as playful as the serial killer's house in the original was creepy. The middle mission is oddly the hardest, since it's timed (ugh) and tries to force you into using the ungainly night vision goggles, which are useful exactly nowhere else.

The Stetchkov Syndicate concludes with a few uncharacteristically open maps. So much room is liable to be a little startling after one game and five maps of breach, bang, clear, rinse, repeat.

The new hardware includes a few useful guns, like the scoped M4, which is ideal for covering your team as

they advance down subway platforms or through a large warehouse, and the grenade launcher that gives your stingers, flashbangs, and CS gas more reach. There's a souped-up, double-barreled taser that also works as a stun baton. This and the new fist with its infinite ammo make it easier to subdue the unruly. The punching animation is a bit silly, but then again, so is a SWAT team smacking around a freaked-out hostage. The best single-player addition is a convenient queuing option that lets you coordinate actions when you split your team into two elements. There's a powerful bit of



[right] The chapel is no sanctuary for terrorism. [below] Why on earth would someone have a greenhouse in the basement?



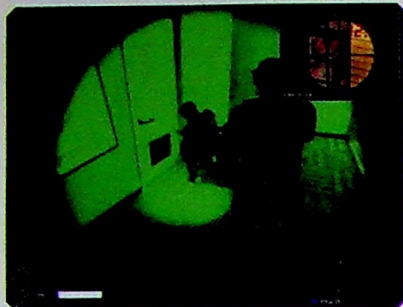
TOP SELLERS



JANUARY 2006

- 1 **World of Warcraft**
Blizzard Entertainment ★★★★★
- 2 **The Sims 2**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★
- 3 **Age of Empires III**
Microsoft ★★★
- 4 **Civilization IV**
2K Games ★★★★★
- 5 **Call of Duty 2**
Activision ★★★★★½
- 6 **The Sims 2: Nightlife**
Electronic Arts ★★★
- 7 **Battlefield 2**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★½
- 8 **RollerCoaster Tycoon 3**
Atari ★★★★★½
- 9 **Zoo Tycoon 2**
Microsoft ★★★★★
- 10 **Battlefield 2: Special Forces**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★
- 11 **Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★½
- 12 **Guild Wars**
NCSoft ★★★★★
- 13 **The Sims: Complete**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★
- 14 **The Movies**
Activision ★★★
- 15 **Sims 2: University**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★
- 16 **Zoo Tycoon: Complete**
Microsoft ★★★★★½
- 17 **The Sims Deluxe**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★
- 18 **F.E.A.R.**
Vivendi Universal ★★★★★½
- 19 **Dungeon Siege II**
Microsoft ★★★★★½
- 20 **Black & White 2**
Electronic Arts ★½

Source: NPD Group/NPD Funworld. The January list is based on units sold by more than 70 channel partners, representing 90% of the U.S. retail consumer market.



[top] You really only have to play one mission in green-o-rama. [above] Taser time.

that old *Rainbow Six* planning payoff when you perfectly storm a room from two separate entrances.

But what you're really getting with *The Stetchkov Syndicate* is a box of notable multiplayer improvements. The significance of the voice-over-IP communication can't be overstated. The command interface has always been good in *SWAT 4*, but anyone who's played a shooter on Xbox Live knows what a difference talking makes. "Smash & Grab" is the dramatic name for a mode in which the suspects have to get a suitcase to the exit before a time limit runs out. The SWAT team can reduce the time limit by capturing suspects instead of just killing them. It's easily the best way to bring into play *SWAT 4*'s non-lethal weapons in multiplayer games. (Unfortunately, it won't work with the original maps.)

Finally, you can use the Quick Mission Maker for multiplayer games. Using this to set up dynamic missions gave *SWAT 4* unlimited replayability. This feature now extends into multiplayer cooperative games, although it's disappointing that you still can't bring AI teammates with you. But Irrational has come that much closer to making *SWAT 4* the definitive tactical shooter. As it is, you'll have a grand time with *The Stetchkov Syndicate*, not so much because it's a great expansion pack—it's only so-so—as because *SWAT 4* is worth revisiting for whatever reason. —Tom Chick



All Sold Out

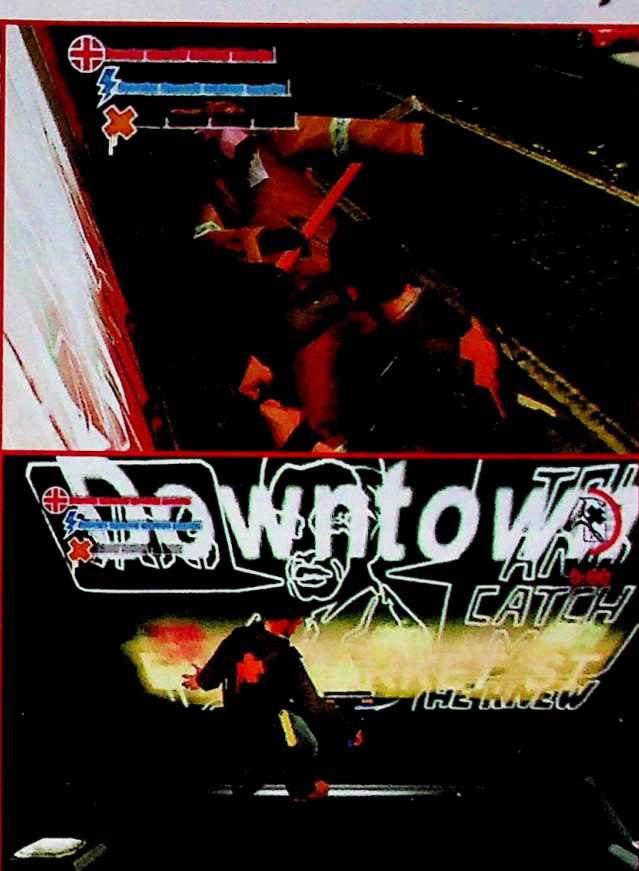
In the world of Marc Ecko's *Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure*, the revolution will be marketed. And sponsored. And branded. And digitized. And sold. BY STEVE BAUMAN



Genre Graffiti Simulator/Catalog Developer The Collective Publisher Atari
ESRB Mature Requirements 1.8GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

In "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," Gil Scott-Heron says, "The revolution will not be brought to you by Xerox." Oh Gil, how could you be so naïve? Not only will the revolution have corporate sponsorship, it will be marketed and promoted across all forms of media. It will be a movie. It will have a soundtrack CD. It will have a clothing line. It will include a cheap magazine subscription. And it will be a videogame. In fact, it'll be called *Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure*. Though its ungainly name makes it sound like a porn game, it's a surprisingly good action adventure with interesting gameplay, superb production values, and dubious social commentary.

You play "graf artist" Trane. Like a four-year-old with a box of Sharpies, you like to draw your name on walls without people's permission. You're living in the city of New Radius,



[opposite page left] I'm all hip, edgy, urban, and branded. (above left) Yo, that's some sick political art. Or maybe you're just making fun of another tagger in public. (top right) There's a rudimentary fighting game, though you should really try to avoid combat whenever possible. (above right) You need to get into some precarious positions to get your message out to the people.

which has been zapped of all culture by its heavy-handed mayor. (In the game's fiction, "no graffiti=no culture.") You initially spend your time fighting with other graffiti gangs and a third-person camera view that always seems to put you at a disadvantage. But the storyline takes a very strange left turn that puts you up against the powers of oppression and freedom of expression. Unfortunately, you're still battling that terrible camera.

The game is divided into levels, and most have you entering an environment with the intent to tag and paint certain objects. Some create "subversive" messages against the government, while others are just your standard "my name needs to be seen by all" tagging. The interface for painting is a little clunky with the mouse, as it requires holding the center button while right- and left-clicking to lay down the paint. While it takes little skill to complete your masterpieces, it's still an interesting game mechanic, requiring a bit of stealth and some quick reflexes to do while remaining unseen. Getting to the tagging locations entails some running, jumping, and occasional fighting with innocent (or not-so-innocent) civil servants.

Taken purely as a game, *Getting Up* works. It has an interesting world full of interesting things to do, and an interesting storyline full of interesting characters. But whoa, its message is a mess. The visual jokes about corporate branding would be a lot funnier if Marc Ecko's name weren't plastered on every piece of clothing in

the game and if it weren't stuffed chock-full of branded goods—it even has the iPod as its music player—with no apparent irony. And the idea that graffiti artists would be the leaders of a revolution is a bit odd, particularly when so much of the game is spent fighting simple turf wars with other scribblers. As a piece of digital agitprop, *Getting Up* is something of a bust.

The controversy in New York over *Getting Up*, in which some contended that it would spur more graffiti, is equally silly. You're as likely to run out and tag your fence after playing as you are to carjack your neighbor after a *Grand Theft Auto* session. Its promotion of graffiti as a revolutionary art form as opposed to a novelty and/or nuisance is much more interesting. Whether graffiti is art probably depends on the location of the wall. If it's downtown, in a Soho loft, it's art. If it's in your backyard, it's probably not. For every beautiful, sanctioned mural in the Bronx, there are thousands of crude scribbles on mailboxes in Schenectady. For every politicized polemic, there's "Chaka."

Marc Ecko's website says, "In the youth culture marketplace, style and credibility reign supreme." That anyone considers "youth culture" a marketplace should destroy the credibility of those trying to exploit it, whether it's through clothing or videogames. If youth culture is going to start a revolution, maybe it'll start one against marketing and branding. ■

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Lockdown

Welcome to the series' not-so-greatest hits



Genre Shadow of a Once-Great Tactical Shooter
Developer Red Storm Entertainment
Publisher Ubisoft ESRB Teen
Requirements 1.5GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

Well, Tom Clancy's *Rainbow Six: Lockdown*, I played *Raven Shield*. I knew *Raven Shield*. *Raven Shield* was a friend of mine. And *Lockdown*, you're no *Raven Shield*.

Shades of Lloyd Bentsen. But ripping off an 18-year-old presidential debate seems appropriate when discussing the most recent addition to Ubisoft's long-running series of tactical shooters, because the new game is a Dan Quayle-sized disappointment compared with its classic predecessors. It shows just how watered down the once-great *Rainbow Six* franchise has become, as considerable realism and intensity have been sacrificed to cater to arcade shooter fans.

Basically, *Lockdown* is a *Rainbow Six* game in name only. While you work with the same old antiterrorist combat specialists and play exterminator in exotic hotspots all over the globe, the focus here is on action. Dozens of tangerines are gunned down in each of the game's 16 missions. Although a single burst of fire can still bring to a premature end your struggle against another goofy terrorist group (once again made purposefully bland so as not to offend any ethnic or religious sensibilities), this is a Rambo-style shooter at heart.

Well, sort of. Although levels are populated with the hordes of bad guys expected from an old-school shooter, Red Storm has oddly left some tactical accoutrements in place. So, while you have to gun down gangs of ne'er-do-wells and deal with Ding Chavez's new health bars, you also have to watch for snipers who can turn out your lights with a single shot, kick in doors, peek around corners, conserve ammo, and generally play Methodical Malcolm in a game geared for Serious Sam.

No momentum is built by the story, either. Judging from Internet scuttlebutt, this is because the level order of the console



[top] It's go time! [left] Hmm, rescue the hostages? Take the gold? Decisions, decisions...

version has been jumbled to cut out some arcade-style minigames. But, even given this explanation, jumping from South Africa to Algeria to Scotland with little rhyme or reason cuts the game into choppy episodes that play a lot like "Rainbow Six's Not-So-Greatest Hits."

Most of these locales look like they've been stripped for parts. The visuals are sharper than those of the usual console port, but it's hard to get excited about venturing into featureless corridors in underground bunkers, deserted parking garages, and unbelievably narrow city streets. Aside from the Scottish parliament buildings and a couple of places reminiscent of the joints that used to make Robin Leach holler on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, none of the settings stick. An hour after finishing *Lockdown*, you remember little but empty hallways and painted-on doors.

The objectives are equally uninspired. You plod from entrance to exit in every mission, killing everything that moves along the way in order to disarm a bomb, rescue hostages, or disarm a bomb in order to rescue hostages. Teamwork is unnecessary. There isn't a planning option to map out movements in mission briefings, possibly

because your AI teammates kill so efficiently on autopilot that they don't need instructions.

All of the enemies populating these levels are just as forgettable. You're as likely to run

into a tango crouching slackjawed in a corner, or one charging your four-person team suicidally, as you are to encounter a baddy with serious interest in killing you. Clone-itis is almost as disconcerting. There are just a handful of enemy faces and vocal samples ("Die, fascist!" will echo in your sleep), so whenever you take on more than three or four foes at once... well, insert your favorite *Attack of the Clones* joke here.

Unlike in other *Rainbow Six* releases, here you can't escape the dodgy enemy AI in multiplayer. Going online in *Lockdown* is frustrating, largely because the game lacks an identity. It doesn't play like a tactical game, but it doesn't play like an action shooter, either, because the pace is slow and pulses can be stopped with a single head shot. As a result, nobody seems to know how to approach the game online, which leads to some chaotic matches.

Basically, there are just enough tactical elements in *Lockdown* to ruin it as an action-oriented shooter, and just enough action elements to ruin it as a tactical shooter. This problem, coupled with the basic blarney of the nonexistent story and dull level design, makes the game unlikely to satisfy anyone. —Brett Todd



WWII Tank Commander

Realism? No. Action? No. Purchase? No



Genre Cheap **Developer** Sylum
Publisher Got Game Entertainment
ESRB Teen **Requirements** 1Ghz CPU; 256MB RAM

Imagine a WWII tank game with lots of pyrotechnics and hearty sound, with fancy graphics of destroyable terrain and tens of friendly and enemy tanks blasting away at one another. This isn't that game. But it does make you wish someone would create it.

Instead, this is a chintzy action game built from a bare-bones engine. The world is close-in and rigidly indestructible, with maps designed to make sure you have to snake back and forth over a small area. This ensures you trigger each and every AI activation radius, because you're certainly not here to admire the scenery.

Once the firing starts, your biggest challenge is hitting things under a bouncing reticle. No gyroscopically stabilized sights here, which is about as much historical accuracy as you're going to get. Technically, the lack of an in-mission save is also historically accurate, but having to replay a 20-minute mission over from the beginning



[top] To capture the WWII Tank Commander experience, look at this picture and imagine the sound of your hand slapping against a cookie sheet. [above] Making the other poor dumb son of a bitch die for his country.

trumps that. Infantry will kill you with their little guns unless you take time out from shooting tanks to squint at their tiny graphics and wonder if you're hitting the right pixel. Ammo is limited, but just in the sense that you can only hold so much. The German tanks you shoot conveniently drop health and ammo. Think of it as salvage. Big floating icons of bullets and crosses salvage.

There was an episode similar to this in the middle of *Call of Duty 2*. You trundled across the desert in a tank, using your shooter controls to blow up other tanks, patiently waiting to reach the other end of the sequence so you could get back into the good parts of the game. Unfortunately, there's no such thing to look forward to in *Tank Commander*. —Tom Chick

Starstruck

Everyone has an opinion on the games they've played, and some post reader reviews on websites like amazon.com and ebgames.com. Here are some "real gamer" views of some current releases, in their words, with their own unique interpretations of the English language.

25 To Life

"Soundtrack sounds cool and I love Gangsta Hop and these kinds of games because u can play as cops or Gangstas! Peace Gangstas!"

★★★★★



"I like this game bcas it is very nice to play and the mouse sensitive is very cool" ★★★★★

"People, stay away from this game. The senseless killings and bad language give gaming a bad name." ★

Need for Speed Most Wanted

"The first thing is the races get boring and take way too long. Second is the cars are very hard to control and gameplay is sloopy." ★★



"[It] has awakend the beast get the game if you have a wheel and a strong pc, if not, don't be angry about lag."

★★★★★

Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones

"wow this is the best Starforce Protection game I've ever seen in my life. two thumbs way down." ★

"The omission of the rock music made me mad. Instead royal indian music is used AGAIN!!!!!!" ★★★★★





King of All Cosmos



The generously designed **Galactic Civilizations II: The Dread Lords** fills space with all sorts of strategy

BY TROY S. GOODFELLOW

★ ★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Space, The Final Frontier **Developer/Publisher** Stardock **ESRB** Everyone 10+ **Requirements** 600MHz CPU; 128MB RAM

There was a time when settling new planets, battling space-ships, and conquering the galaxy were major themes in PC gaming. Nowadays, if it weren't for first-person shooters and *Star Wars* games, it's doubtful there would be any sci-fi computer games at all. In the strategy genre, Frodo and Rommel have replaced Captain Kirk at the center of the gaming legend. It's all elves and wizards or pikemen and panzers.

So the context of the pastime itself makes *Galactic Civilizations II: The Dread Lords* a welcome guest. The fact that the campaign plot of powerful ancients is derivative of so many earlier games is immediately forgiven. The obvious echoes of *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5* are comforting, not jarring. *Galactic Civilizations II* is like a skilled karaoke singer. The tune is not original, but Stardock has a way of making it its own.

It's hard to think of a recent strategy game as colorful as this one, in both meanings of the word. The palette is rich and varied and completely customizable. If you think that your race has ugly ships, you can choose a default design you like better and alter its trim to be more eye-catching. Few 4X strategy games have as much text, and a lot of it here is quite funny. (For those who have forgotten, the Xs represent "explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate.") Most of the text captures the attitudes of the other races you encounter in your expansion across the universe, with each race having its own dialogue for each of the other civilizations. It's not enough to make more than a few of the alien cultures stand out as unique societies, but it's a cut above a lot of the diplomatic dialogue out there.

It's now standard for games like this to have automated governors, but it's hard to see any need to use the ones in *Galactic Civilizations II* unless you are playing on the largest maps. If you do choose to use these virtual viceroys, it's easy to set their priorities, and they will faithfully follow them. But planetary management is a snap, so manual control will always trump the automated route.

The inclusion of the planetary governors is more likely just a

symptom of Stardock's generosity. Do you need to custom-design ships? No, but they'll let you. Tired of games with three difficulty levels? Here's seven! There aren't just different forms of government—there are different political parties that add bonuses to the player. It's a tribute to good game design that none of these gifts get in the way of efficiency and that you are never overwhelmed by all the information you can find.

Take the details of each planet you rule. Ripping a page from *Civilization IV's* book, *Galactic Civilizations II* gives you a nice breakdown of why your people love or hate you. You will find that you almost never need these numbers, since a global (galactic?) approval rating gives you a general idea of how you're doing. Sad faces and threats of secession give you lots of time to prevent a disaster, but the exact numbers are available for the micromanager.

On the combat side, victory depends on massing fleets with the right weapons against enemies with the wrong shields. The total transparency of the world means that you can tell whether Bond V is defended by frigates or snipers, so you can prepare your armada for the enemy you expect. Custom ship design is a nice distraction, but it's hardly essential to victory. Your enemies are usually satisfied with their default ships, and building the ultimate DeathShip is only satisfying the first few times you do it. Some of the structure pieces of new vessels are a little finicky, too, so your dream ship may look more like a mutant hedgehog on your first few tries. An excellent design could turn the tide of a war, but not as quickly as grabbing a great planet will. This is a game about taking out societies, not battleships.

You will find yourself at war very quickly, too. This is not a game for virtual Gandhis. Though there are diplomatic and "influence" victory options, triumph depends on making sure that your planets are well protected. On lower difficulty levels, the AI will send unescorted transports into your zone of control, but on normal and higher levels, it appropriately softens up the invasion area before wasting valuable men.

When you do get into a firefight, you may be treated to the useless but compelling ship-to-ship combat view. You can't control the ships at all, but you are offered a beautiful rendering of the battle as it plays out, with a switch of camera angles as you watch every die roll. When your hordes of tiny fighters swarm an enemy frigate, the whole thing looks like *Star Wars* on the cheap. If they'd put only half as much thought into the dull land combat screen, where you just watch a bunch of numbers count down, *Galactic Civilizations II* could have been a good movie as well as a good game.

There are some missteps. The mostly excellent manual doesn't tell you which techs you need to build certain classes of ships, forcing you to write stuff down that should be somewhere easy to find, like a *Galcivilopedia* or something. The ethics system is written in such a way that only suckers play nice. The good choices all penalize you for no major benefit that you can't equalize with an alignment that picks up some cash along the way.

Ultimately, these faults are forgotten with every zap-zap of a laser gun or groveling plea of the Yor Collective. *Galactic Civilizations II* may not lead to a resurgence of space conquest games, but as long as it's available, the renaissance can wait. ■

(clockwise from opposite page top) Enemy fleet in orbit; The research tree feels as infinite as space itself; Shields up, Sulu; Beware of squirrels who speak gibberish.



Excess ain't rebellion: fight the power, push the product.

Tony Hawk's American Wasteland

Same old grind

★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Mallpunk Sk8r Developer Neversoft/Aspyr Entertainment Publisher Aspyr Entertainment ESRB Teen

Over the course of seven games and three acronyms, the *Tony Hawk* series has inexorably morphed into the Hot Topic of the videogame universe, a game that glitziy packages and commodifies the skater subculture it glorifies. Aspyr's letter-

perfect PC port of *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland*—that's *THAW* if you're street, dude—is just the latest dazzling sign of the apocalypse.

The free-form Hollywood and LA cityscapes you grind and powerslide through (remember to bring your gamepad) look detailed and gorgeous, what with all those oh-so-beautiful product placements. But cleverly disguised load times, a few new moves, and the chance to bunny-hop over sandwich-board toting homeless dudes on a BMX bike can't mask the fact that this is basically the same old grind-combo we've been sticking for years, tightly repackaged for the adoring masses.

THAW's story mode dumps you into the DVS Milans of a country bumpkin trying to skate to glory in the big, bad city. Mission options abound, most of which are de-

signed either to re-teach you basic moves you've learned in every other *Hawk* game, or to help you score hipster deco (think shark heads and couches) for your bitchin' skate ranch. Classic mode regurgitates all those levels and timed challenges you remember from past games. If you're feeling a little Frankenstein, you can bust out the game's create-a-skater feature, concocting a sk8r boi who's even more mutant than Bam Margera.

So, if *THAW*'s wheels are mostly retreads, why the solid score? Simple: the thrill of capping off a 10,000-point spin combo still packs the power punch of a Red Bull slammer, and it's even better when you're doing it in a world that's as detailed and well constructed as this one. Break out the Dead Kennedys T-shirts, everyone; here's to the inevitable *THAW 2*. —Aaron R. Conklin

The mighty pink army breaks through.



Takeda 2

Ashigaru? Gesundheit



Genre Not-so-Total War **Developer/Publisher** Magitech **Requirements** 1.5GHz CPU; 512MB RAM **ESRB** Unrated

Takeda 2 is the sequel to a mostly obscure 2001 game that had the misfortune to be released in the wake of *Shogun: Total War*. The market wasn't quite ready for a smaller-budget *Total War* dopelgänger, so *Takeda* came and *Takeda* went.

The sequel is actually a remake. Set once again in the pre-Tokugawa civil wars, *Takeda 2* gives you the choice of playing one of three clans trying to unite the Land of the Rising Sun under one daimyo. Success requires a deft hand at diplomacy, attention to troop levels, and a lot of luck. You start small enough to be wiped out in your first war. There's no fog of war, either, so getting humiliated is especially embarrassing.

The interface can make it pretty difficult to figure out exactly what is going on at any given time. Even with video tutorials and a passable manual, the strategic level learning curve is steep, especially when you consider how little is actually happening on the map. You can marry daughters off to im-

Bowl Bound

Grey Dog Software/Not Rated ★★★

It doesn't take much to turn a potentially brilliant text-based sports simulation into an average one. Take this one, for instance. It's a brilliantly designed college football game with everything you could possibly want in a sim, from a deep recruiting model to a "fantasy" system that provides the option of a post-season playoff rather than the stodgy and flawed BCS bowl system. From calling the individual plays to building your program via recruiting, it delivers the goods. It's also agonizingly broken in certain key areas, such as poll logic. Teams lose and go up in the rankings, and sometimes ones ranked number one drop after winning games. It's crazy. Losing out on a championship game bid because the poll logic is screwed up is almost enough to make you not want to play at all. That said, Grey Dog is diligently patching the game, trying to iron out its issues; hopefully, it can smooth everything out, because the game has too much potential to be flattened by a few obvious glitches. —William Abner



Prussia's Glory

Shrapnel/Unrated ★★★

Prussia's Glory is a scenario add-on to last year's *Draagoon* and covers the same historical territory. The battles are different, but they are still highlights from the career of Prussia's Frederick the Great. The same quality design is here. The scenarios range from huge, like the epic Leuthen, to small vignettes focusing on key points in larger battles. The graphics are still colorful but blotchy, and the interface wonky but manageable. If you feel the need to complete your set of *Horse and Musket* games, *Prussia's Glory* is a decent buy, but there are no compelling innovations that make it a must have for any but the mustiest of grognards. —TSG



prove your foreign relations and send ninjas to remove hassles.

On the battlefield, control is achieved exclusively through a combination of buttons and mouse movement, but there are no drag-select or mouse-only orders. The wide range of formations and the ability to change these on the fly yield a wide variety of ways in which the struggles can develop, but the outcome almost always goes to the superior force, no matter how marginal. There is little evidence of the importance of command, experience, or even troop types beyond the normal

spearman/cavalry/swordsmen circle.

Takeda 2 isn't terrible, but it has a hard drive footprint bigger than both *Civilization IV* and *Silent Hunter III*, and it's not clear what that size is being used for. The maps are simple, the battlefields are all green, and the soldiers aren't exactly full of detail. Add the fact that you can't Alt-Tab out of the boredom without crashing, and the battles aren't especially compelling.

Pass. —Troy S. Goodfellow

MX vs. ATV Unleashed

The return of some of that motocross madness

★★★★½

Genre Groin Injury Simulator **Developer** Rainbow Studios **Publisher** THQ **Requirements** 1.2GHz CPU; 256MB RAM ESRB Teen

One of the stranger and largely untold stories in game development is how Rainbow Studios went from producing pre-rendered "shooting gallery" games like *Deadly Tide* and *The Hive* to creating one of the most entertaining race games ever, *Motocross Madness*. It was a totally out-of-left-field leap, and in its day it was one of the best-looking 3D games ever produced.

After producing a second *Motocross Madness* sequel, Rainbow moved over to consoles to produce a half dozen or so race games similar to those two PC products. *MX vs. ATV Unleashed* is the first of its console games to make its way back to the PC, and it's a welcome return. *MX vs. ATV* looks a lot like *Motocross Madness 2*, in fact. It also feels a lot like it, with same-y controls, physics, AI, and



[above] This isn't going to end well. [left] Checkpoint races are wonderfully chaotic.



days of *Madness*; you'd think *MX vs. ATV* would feel a wee bit fresher and next-generation, or whatever term you want to use that implies, "It should have better graphics."

Still, there's a lot to like here. There are a half dozen or so vehicles to drive, including motocross bikes, ATVs, dune buggies, monster trucks, and poor-controlling airplanes. All of the ground vehicles feel pretty much the same, and the physics modeling is plausibly realistic (or is that entertainingly unrealistic?), even as you hurtle yourself to dangerous heights. There are tons of modes of

play: stadium races, freestyle, hill climbs, totally crazy waypoint races in wide open areas, and lots more. The game's real strength emerges on any of the outdoor tracks. The races are impossibly entertaining and chaotic, despite the fact that, unfortunately, the opponent AI isn't all that challenging, and the collision detection between riders seems more theoretical than actual.

But when you're blazing across the desert or through the forest at impossible speeds and taking jumps that send you into the stratosphere, it's hard to care about anything other than landing your vehicle without suffering a catastrophic virtual groin injury. Even after five years, it still hurts so good. —Steve Bauman

Total College Basketball

Grey Dog Software/Everyone

★★★★½

This intricately detailed college hoop sim has all the trappings: polls, tournaments, a deep recruiting model, and online league support. What keeps it from reaching the final four is that not all its parts work as well as they should. Simulated scores seem a bit too random, and it also puts a heavy emphasis on mundane tasks like managing your team's overall budget, which, while technically important, isn't a whole lot of fun. Still, this is the best text-based college basketball sim around. —William Abner



The Star and Crescent

Shrapnel/Unrated ★★★★★

For serious wargamers only, *Star and Crescent* is the final game to be made with ProSim's *Armored Task Force* engine. Pitting the Israeli Defense Force against its Arab neighbors, it mostly features your tanks trying to find and kill the other guy's tanks. You can sprint through the Sinai and wipe out every T-34 you find or entrench yourself on the Golan to prevent a Syrian breakthrough. There are some minor additions here and there, but the real selling point here is scenario design. Most are brief but provide challenging tactical exercises that force you to make tradeoffs between coverage and local advantage. Giving orders is still too convoluted, but the package holds together so long as you can remember what you're trying to do. —Tray S. Goodfellow



revisionist history

By Matthew Gallant

Gumshoe

Only Vice President Cheney could think of mixing beer, blood-thinning medication, a shotgun, an old coot lawyer's face, and a lifelong disdain for human kindness to create the best hunting accident since Ted Nugent chipped his tooth gnawing on the leg bone of a still-living grizzly bear.

But could *Duck Hunt* really provide the best Nintendo-based joke concerning the matter, as seen on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*? Well, probably. Cheney was "canned" hunting the tiny elderly-lawyer-face-breasted quail, and all birds are related to ducks in some way. Science can't fully explain how, though it has tried.

For a moment, though, consider *Gumshoe*, if you've ever even heard of it. *Duck Hunt*'s strength when it comes to making a joke about the V-POTUS 2000's firearm misadventures isn't that it's about shooting birds, because that's only what he was supposed



"In the NES Zapper title *Gumshoe*, you actually shoot a guy, not a duck or a paper gangster or a bonus round can."

to be doing. No, its strength in the humor department is that it's a very well-known game. Besides being a big hit in the PlayChoice arcade cabinets along with *Hogan's Alley*, it was included with the NES Action Pack. The resonance with the actual story was relatively weak.

See, in the less-known NES Zapper title *Gumshoe*, you actually shoot a guy, not a duck or a paper gangster or a bonus round can. You shoot a real pixelated man. True, his name's Mr.

Stevenson, not Whittington, though you could swap those names and not break the meter of your ode to the labels pharmacists put on pill bottles. He isn't a lawyer, either; he's an ex-FBI agent who has become a private dick. You have to help the detective retrieve five diamonds by shooting him over and over again. Just to make him jump and avoid obstacles and enemies.

You may be thinking about the bird aspect of the event. Oh, there are birds that you can shoot. These birds are way more entertaining, too. No wall-eyed death spiral, they just turn instantly into roast chicken by virtue of virtual bullet, and if they fall on Stevenson you earn points. No matter where the now fully plucked and cooked dinner lands on him, it just disappears because that's how videogame characters eat. You're a reader of this magazine; you know how that works.

But even with such classic charm, and even though a platform game controlled by light gun was really innovative, *Gumshoe* was never a big deal. Plus, the titular character wore a trenchcoat and hat, so people watching *The Daily Show* who weren't familiar with the game (i.e., pretty much all of them) might have thought he was supposed to be Jack Abramoff. The point is that accessible trumps optimal. So, even though shooting a guy just to make him jump and frantically bicycle his tiny legs as he unnaturally floats through the roast bird-laden air is probably more along the lines of what happened that day at the ranch, *Duck Hunt* was the right choice.

What this example more importantly illustrates, however, is the significance of gimmick game peripherals to the future of political satire, and hence the urgent need for all such games to be recognized, lest another *Gumshoe* fall into obscurity and necessitate the making of a less apropos but more identifiable reference. *Guitar Hero* needs to get into the public consciousness, not simply because it's rad, but also

in case 20 years down the line the secretary of state caves in the French ambassador's skull with a Gibson SG while blasted on Oxycontin and hard cider.

And the Revolution! Nintendo's already acknowledged the political importance of the console and its attention-grabbing control scheme with its name; now they just need to present some forward-thinking game implementations to go with it. Or... retro. Yes, virtualize the controller as the handle of a cane and take the player back to 1798, as Representative Roger Griswold (Fed. CT) takes out his frustrations over congressional bickering on the issue of French naval belligerence by trouncing Matthew Lyon (R-VT) on the floor of the House of Representatives. Well, that and Lyon had spat tobacco on him earlier. But a controller that could simulate that would be even less popular than *Gumshoe*. ■

technicalities

by Steve Bauman

Backing Up is Hard to Do

As your hard drive space increases, your need to backup the data does too

One of the reasons I can't get into console games as much as computer games is that I feel less connected to the hardware. Yeah, it shouldn't matter. It should always be "about the games." But building your own PC gives you a greater feeling of ownership of the machine, and when you're more connected to your hardware, you get even more satisfaction from everything you do with it. When that game runs perfectly smooth after an upgrade, you know it's because of the parts you've chosen.



"If I had to re-rip my CD collection again... well, I probably wouldn't bother."

However, I've pretty much lost all interest in tweaking operating systems. I just want them to work. In fact, we used to produce yearly "Tweak Guides" for optimizing Windows for games, but with the release of Windows XP, they've become unnecessary. With XP, there's little you can do on an OS level to significantly impact a game's performance, aside from never running something like Norton in the background. Give Microsoft some credit; XP is pretty solid out of the box. Assuming it's patched. With current drivers.

So, as of right now, I'm happy with XP as both a work and play OS. It's stable, I have no conflicts I'm aware of, and it just runs. And runs. And runs some more. I have "Cool & Quiet" enabled, which lets the processor clock itself down and lower the fan speeds. This lets it hum along relatively quietly, which is important since my PC is in my living room. I only re-boot the machine every few days, more out of habit than necessity. And I never run into any problems running games; they just work.

I'm starting to get more paranoid about hard drive crashes, though. It's not a matter of if your hard drives will fail; it's a matter of when. And if you have a system with RAID 0, you're actually doubling your chances of killing all of your data and your OS.

Making matters even worse, and better, huge hard drives are cheap. Not only do they allow you to keep everything, you now feel compelled to keep everything. In addition to however many megabytes of games I have installed at any given time, I have something like 30-40GB of MP3 files littering my hard drive—all legal, thank you very much. If I had to re-rip my CD collection again... well, I probably wouldn't bother. Do I really need *Revolver* and *Pleased to Meet Me* available 24-7?

I've also started keeping saved games around, which is something I rarely used to do. And lord knows I don't want to re-download all of the *World of Warcraft* patches, especially if I have to use Blizzard's slowpoke downloader. And what about those old DOS games? And all of those mods I've downloaded?

Hopefully, Windows Vista will do a better job enforcing where settings and saved games are stored. I want to be able to easily back up documents, e-mail, all settings for applications I regularly use, and my media files without having to find the files littered all over my hard drive. In theory, backing up "My Documents" is supposed to accomplish this. In reality, it grabs things you don't want, and few games store their saved games there anyway.

But that's tomorrow. Today, I just want a more efficient backup system and a media server, and I want fewer software/OS hassles. What I'd love to see is for someone to produce a network hard drive server. It would be a box that sits in a corner and connects to your network via Ethernet or wirelessly. It would back itself up all the time, and have built-in redundancy. It would have minimal OS functionality, and all of the configuration would be done from your PC. You could store all of your media and backups on the thing and feel a wee-bit less paranoid that you may lose all of your precious files and data.

Such a beast, as I envision it, doesn't exist, though I've tried building something similar using some spare parts from older systems and running Windows XP Media Center Edition. It's plugged into my TV, but it still needs a mouse and keyboard. Though I can mess with the settings using Remote Desktop, I'd rather it be a bit more stripped down. And I want it to be quieter. And I want a pony.

My great backup server/media center worked for a few weeks, but then the main boot drive failed—that's what I get for using an old hard drive that had been sitting around for a few years. I didn't have it backed up, of course, so I'm back at square one. Getting the hardware working was easy enough, but I'm sick of re-installing and configuring the OS. I want a simpler hardware solution.

So, if anyone ever comes up with my mythical hardware backup/media server, they'd have at least one guaranteed sale. And folks, backup your system from time-to-time.

Kevin Rice will return next issue.

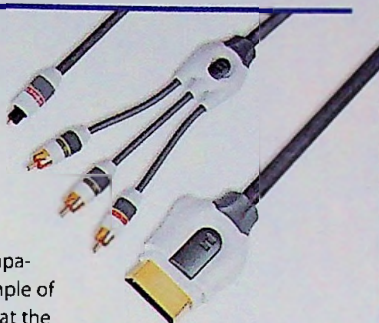
The Cable Guys

There's a Monster driving your 360

People who constantly talk about the ease of setting up a console versus a PC haven't seen a layman try to set up HD peripherals. Do you choose composite, S-Video, or (with the Xbox 360) VGA for your video signal? How about coaxial or optical? And which is which?

To make it even more confusing, some would say the default cables you get with your high-end gear aren't up to snuff. Monster Cable is one of those companies, and its line of Xbox 360 cables is a perfect example of the confusion endemic in the world of HD. It's not that the products are poorly documented or mislabeled; it's just that there are five different options for hooking a 360 to your TV and audio system. Some can even be mixed and matched—if you use a VGA connector, for example, you'll need the fiber optic kit to get 5.1 audio.

The cables look extremely cool with their silver mesh covers, though it's pretty hard to detect any improvement in picture or sound quality over the ones that come with your 360. At up to \$60 for a set, you might expect a more obvious improvement. For a lot of people, though, just knowing the cables are "better" is probably enough. —Steve Bauman



Copy Commander 9 V-COM/\$34.99 ★ ★ ★ ★ ½

Everyone needs to replace an old hard drive at some point. While installing a new one isn't too tough, getting all your old stuff (the OS, all your programs, data, etc.) to a new drive can be tricky. Most people think of the venerable Norton Ghost for this operation, but it has ballooned into a full system backup/monitoring/suite that costs twice as much as V-Com's *Copy Commander 9*. You don't even install it: You simply set your computer to boot from the CD, or make a bootable floppy. From there, the software runs in a Windows-like interface, and it includes a "one-click" option that automatically does the work for you. There are plenty of advanced options for the more technically inclined, but it features a clean, easy-to-understand interface, and the operation is flawless. If you need to transfer the entire contents of one drive to another, there's no easier—or less expensive—way to do it than this. —Kevin Rice



Mantis Speed Mat Razer/\$29.99 ★ ★ ★ ★

Someone apparently told mouse maker Razer it needed to be huge in mousepads. But it misheard, so the company decided it needed to make huge mousepads. The foam and cloth Mantis pads are enormous, coming in at 14x17.25 inches of oversized mousing goodness. There are two models, one optimized for "Control" and the other for "Speed." Each has a different texture and pattern, though in actual use it's hard to tell the two apart. The Speed pad features a smoother surface, making it slightly more appealing to the touch. Both are high quality, though they have that nasty foam rubber-y/cloth mouse pad smell (which eventually goes away). Though the plastic Everglide surfaces—or Razer's own aluminum eXactMat—remain favorites, these are solid choices. —SB



ROLL YOUR OWN

If you're looking to build your own machine, or are in the market for a new one, you're faced with an overwhelming number of choices. This monthly guide gives you some basic starting information on the most critical components of any gaming system: processor and video.

Processor

Some day, Intel will release a processor that matches AMD in price and performance. Maybe. Hopefully. Competition is nice. Today, there is none.

Budget

Athlon 64 3700+

A lot of people say, "Go with a faster processor." Hogwash. Save some money here and put it in your video-card budget. \$240

Sweet Spot

Athlon 64 X2 3800+

This is a terrific performer for the price. Dual core is the future, though there's nothing that makes it a superior choice today. \$320

Ultimate

Athlon FX-60

The flagship of the AMD consumer processors is the best a gamer can do: dual-cores, superb performance, high price. \$1000

Video

ATI is slowly rolling out its new models, though the best deals remain previous generation cards that keep dropping in price.

Budget

GeForce 6800GS/Radeon X1600 Pro

The 6600GT is dead; long live the 6600GT. The 6800GS is at the high-end of "budget," but it delivers amazing performance. \$160-\$200

Sweet Spot

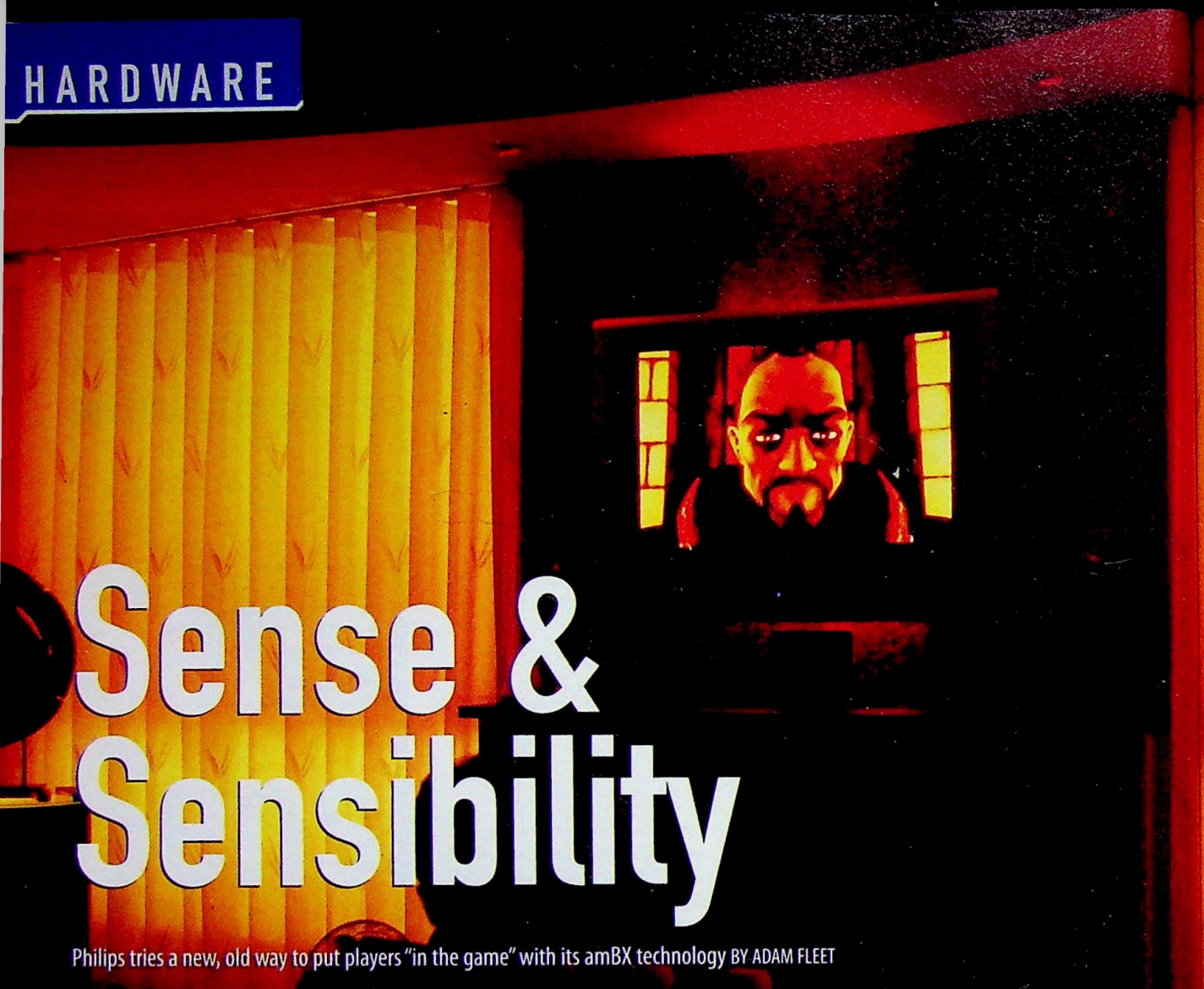
GeForce 6800 GT/Radeon X800 XL

One of the great benefits to new, high-end cards is the subsequent drop in price of previous generation ones. \$260

Ultimate

GeForce 7800GTX/Radeon X1900 XTX

If you want the absolute fastest card in existence, these are your options. The Radeon is faster, but the GeForce cards are easier to find. \$400-\$580



Sense & Sensibility

Philips tries a new, old way to put players "in the game" with its amBX technology BY ADAM FLEET

In 1960, Mike Todd, Jr. produced *Scent of Mystery*, the first and last film shown in what Todd dubbed "Smell-O-Vision." The process used canned smells stored under moviegoers' seats, which were released at specific times during the film. Newspaper advertisements equated its significance to that of the first talkies, proclaiming, "First They Moved! Then They Talked! Now They Smell!" Unfortunately, there were flaws in the system. The primary one was an inability to get old smells out before new ones were released. In other words, it stunk. Literally. *Scent of Mystery* was swiftly booted out of theaters, and Smell-O-Vision was gone like a bad scent in the wind.

Nearly half a century later, Smell-O-Vision still hasn't made a comeback at the local Cineplex. It is, however, considerably closer to making it into your house than you may think. Philips is taking the idea of expanding media from traditional audio and video

and running with it, creating a system it calls amBX. "The core idea is to bring the entertainment experience out of screen spaces and into the space around you, and to use devices in the physical space to render entertainment and to enhance it," explains David Eves, chief technology officer for amBX.

Scent of Game Does that mean Philips is going to come to your house and install scent canisters in all your furniture so you can finally smell what The Rock is cooking? No, probably not. But imagine you're playing a game and your avatar is running across a field on a nice sunny day. As you do this, the area around your computer lights up with a nice, warm glow, and you feel a soft breeze on your face. Investigating a cave causes the lights in the room to dim to a dusky blue, and the air becomes still and cool. Suddenly there's a

flash of orange light, not on the screen but in your periphery, alerting you to the attack of a hidden enemy. Smoothly dodging the fireball, you feel the heat as it whizzes by. The impact of the projectile exploding against the cave wall shakes your seat, brightening the room behind you with another bloom of orange light and filling your nose with the smell of smoke.

All of this could be made possible by peripheral devices that communicate with the game you're playing, or the movie you're watching, or even the web page you're viewing, via Philips' amBX software and scripting language. Lights are currently supported in 27 different locations, nine positions on three different height levels. Fans can be used to simulate movement or a rush of wind from an airplane propeller. Vibration devices, similar in effect to the rumble packs in many console controllers, can be placed in furniture, or anywhere else



[top] A sample amBX PC rig, with half a dozen lights, a minifan, and a vibrating wrist rest. [above] Engineering aesthetics: Some amBX home theater prototypes that haven't yet been fully beautified.

you might want to shake, rattle, and roll.

Those three types of device were already on display at a Philips demonstration of amBX in February, each very effective in its own right and even more so collectively. Devices that produce heat, cold, and yes, even smell have been talked about but weren't yet in the prototype stage at the time of this presentation. Though Philips will most likely support amBX with some hardware of its own, such as the already existing line of LCD TVs, ultimately the kinds of devices made available will depend on Philips' ability to sell the industry on the potential for this technology and collect partners with whom to collaborate.

Chicken and Eggs "We think [amBX] will help solve the chicken and the egg problem you always get when new technology is introduced," says Jo Cooke, chief marketing officer for amBX. "By helping to bridge

the gap between the content creators and the hardware manufacturers, it may be possible to make profitable all sorts of devices that wouldn't stand a chance on their own. Knowing there's a system in place to easily plug into with the considerable corporate weight of Philips backing it up could change some minds and make some very interesting, even eccentric, ideas possible. Whatever [hardware manufacturers] want to make is up to them. It's not for us to dictate. What we're doing is making it possible."

The plan is to make amBX as modular as possible. Whatever devices you have plugged into your rig will work to give you the best experience they can, whether it's just a couple of lights or a fully decked-out room. A PC starter set composed of a few lights, a single small fan, and a single vibration device is estimated to cost in the neighborhood of \$200, but the sky could be the limit as far as more elaborate or high-end sets go. Though the PC is the launch point for amBX, with devices and software arriving at retail as early as this year's holi-

day shopping season, you can expect home theater versions to follow before too long.

Demos and Implementation A significant part of amBX's success will most likely hinge on the artistry with which it is implemented in games as well as other media. As much as the demonstrations proved the effectiveness of amBX in enhancing a sensory experience, they also showed the potential to distract, something of which game developers in particular will have to be wary.

"In a narrative game, like an adventure, what you aim to do is to keep the viewer very much focused on the screen," explains Charles Cecil of Revolution Studios, who has been working with Philips on an amBX demo of *Broken Sword III* as well as an upcoming collaboration not yet officially announced. "With amBX, we have to be careful to support rather than compete with the experience."

Expect more announcements about amBX partners and projects later this year. Maybe by then, you'll be able to smell the excitement. Literally. ■

road to nowhere

by Cindy Yans

Chaos Mutates Catwoman

Games Workshop refugee explains it all for you

I met Paul Barnett, formerly of Games Workshop, in Spring of 2003 when GW was working with Climax on the first iteration of *Warhammer Online*. He was enthusiastic. Earlier this year, I saw him again, wearing his *Warhammer* Licensed Content Producer cap. He is now a crazy man—a lunatic, bonkers, psychotic, preposterous, and perhaps one of the funniest people I've ever met.



"Warhammer is not just a lot of toy soldiers. Warhammer is 'an idea' that has been turned into a lot of toy soldiers." —Paul Barnett

The night before our formal meeting, several of us were at dinner, and he let slip something about *Warhammer* and Batman (it was the martinis). Horrified, the others squelched him and told him to stop or he'd spoil it—whatever "it" was. *Warhammer* and Batman? Uh, yeah. He gave a presentation the next day, one that belonged on Comedy Central, and "it" was this: "I went to Mythic as an 'Ambassador of Madness,'" he said, without missing a beat. "And my job is to try and translate, and get the really, really enthusiastic Americans to understand how to do the *Warhammer*, and to convince the quiet English people that the loud, brash Americans are doing all of it the way they want them to.

"So the first thing I did was to try to come up with a way to explain what we do. And I tried it every which way I could... *Warhammer* is not just a lot of toy soldiers. *Warhammer* is 'an idea' that has been turned into a lot of toy soldiers. And the

closest thing I could find in America that's similar to that is Batman. Because Batman is an idea: It's a bloke, with a cape and a butler, whose parents got killed, and who fights criminals. I always have to mention 'butler,' because I'm English, and I find it rather my 'duty' to mention 'service.'

"But that's what Batman is. And what they do is they take the idea of Batman, and then they bring it out to different media; they have the comic *Batman*, or the camp TV series *Batman*; the different styles of movie—the Burton ones, the current new, really Gothic ones—bend-y toys, lunchboxes. Whichever way they bring it out, though, the core drivers are the same: 'bloke,' 'cape,' 'butler,' 'parents' deaths,' 'fights criminals.' That's the idea of Batman.

"*Warhammer* is exactly the same. Its version of 'bloke, cape, butler, parents' deaths, criminals' is 'battle,' 'grudges,' 'empires,' 'danger,' 'humor,' 'monsters,' 'magic,' and 'chaos.' Those are the eight things. Eight is the magic *Warhammer* number. It turns up everywhere. The more you look for it, the more you see it. I don't know if it's a self-fulfilling prophecy, but eight points on the Chaos Star, Eight Winds of Magic, eight core things that *Warhammer* is. So this is the basic idea of *Warhammer*, and it's been brought out in different ways: miniatures, comics, novels, art books, single-player computer games... and what we're doing: We're the first people who are going to bring to market an imagination of the core ideas in the form of an MMO.

"That's the basic stuff. Then you have the over-arching principles. Now, Batman has over-arching principles; he's never going to win. He's never going to get fulfillment. He's always going to be lonely. There's just no two ways about it—Batman can't marry. It can't come to an end. The crime cannot be finished. He can never be absolved from his crime. If he could, the comic would stop, no one would want to make any more movies, so it's an endless cycle. *Warhammer* is the same. It's about epic, heroic struggle. And those words are in any combination: It's a struggle that's epically heroic; it's a heroic struggle that's epic. It doesn't matter if it's perpetual, and that fits in beautifully with what we're doing because we're doing a perpetual MMO game. There is no over-arching story where you can go, 'And Then the Elves Made Peace...' because they don't. Because it's not in the nature of the cauldron of our views. It's not like *Lord of the Rings*, where you go, 'Well, if I were to plan a *Lord of the Rings* game, it's all very well, but I do know that that little Hobbit drops that ring in the thing, doesn't he? I don't get to do it. I can't blow up the Death Star. Luke Skywalker gets to do it.' Well, none of that's written in our world. You can be the hero, and you will be, I think. But it will be struggle—perpetual, unending struggle. [His wild eyes darken further, and his voice fills with movie-trailer-voiceover angst.] Relentless... war. That's what we want. That's what we thrive on."

Shtick as well as gestalt? He could market that stuff. ■

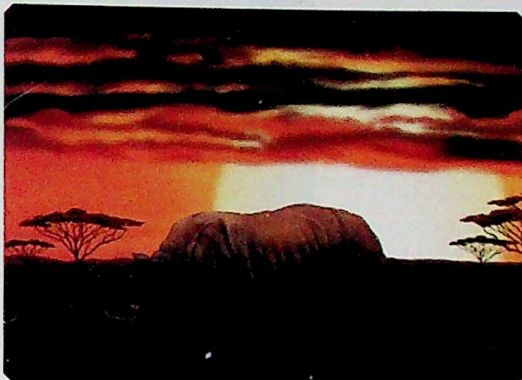
The Mainland Off Madagascar

Neither Dwarf nor Elf nor Gnome to darken Africa

Earlier this year during Black History Month, Africast TV (a network that offers Africa-focused entertainment, multi-media and information services) announced the first African-themed MMO. *Africa* is set in 13th century Antartci...er, Africa, and is infused throughout with the history, mythology, and folklore of the Dark Continent. It invites you to set forth on an adventure in which you must draw upon the magic of the land or the strength of your battle skills to survive and emerge victorious.

"The game began as a lunchtime conversation in January 2005," says lead designer Tracy Spaight, who's never designed a game. "I found myself seated across from John Sarpong, founder of Africast Global Media and grandson of the late King Prempeh I. He's an extraordinary man with a powerful vision of Africa's future. We struck up a conversation about the power of videogames to tell stories, convey ideas, and entertain. 'Wouldn't it be cool,' I mused, 'to lead a caravan across the Sahara, to visit Timbuktu, to stroll through the Roman ruins at Lepis Magna, and to explore the vast jungles and savannahs of Africa?'"

Well, sure it would. And the hundreds of NPCs (villagers, towns folk, merchants, guards, courtiers, scholars, scribes, alchemists, farmers, herders, craftsmen, blacksmiths, potters, weavers, shamans, hunters, Berber nomads, Tuareg desert raiders, and so forth) think so too. —Cindy Yans



MMOCABULARY

Famous Pairs

Why expound when two letters will suffice?

LD Stands for "linkdead." When a player "goes linkdead," it means that he has lost his connection to the game server, often leaving him in a frozen state in the game-world. Generally a party will wait for an LD character to log back in, unless he's a jerk. Then it's a really opportune time to escape [ditch?] him.

MT Stands for "mistell." You use this to let people know that you typed something into a public channel that was intended for either a different channel, or a private messagely to a single individual; —this is especially entertaining when the message is extremely embarrassing or explicit.

PL Stands for "power-leveling," an activity in which a higher-level player performs activities that enable a much lower-level character to gain experience very, very quickly, in a way that he would not be able to manage accomplish alone. Several online businesses sell power-leveling services: you turn over your account to them, and pay them according to the number of levels you gain.

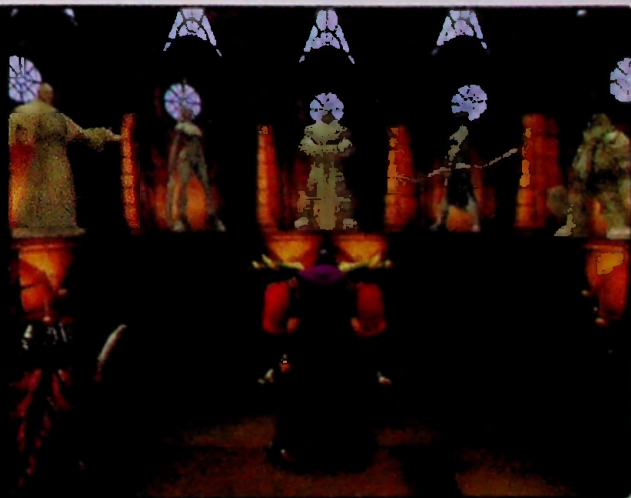
RL Stands for "real life," to differentiate it from "in game," as in, "What do you do in RL?" "Oh! In RL? I attend fifth grade. LOL."

POWERLEVEL

Life After 40

Seeing red once again in World of Warcraft

Are you barely over 40 and don't ever want to see the Scarlet Monastery again? Does the thought of Mograine give you a migraine? Think again. There's a lot of easy loot to be had if you're willing to re-tread the marble hallways. Go through the main entrance and turn left. Plow through the dozen or so Level 30-32 elites, and there's the Graveyard you probably never spent more time in than you had to. You can take out the Level 30-ish ghosts in groups of three, and the others, the elite shades and elite zombies, you can take out one at a time. The ease of the kills here is what makes it so lucrative: the ghosts, zombies and shades drop from 2-6 silver, the named elites drop blue items on a regular basis, and then there are loads of silk (which may or may not be good, depending on the market), plenty of greens, and every now and then, some Grave Moss. Some folks say they get 10 or more gold per hour repeating this area.



Bizzaro SuperArtist

Long-time comics creator will be at the helm of Sony's next big thing

Jim Lee, one of the most popular comic book artists in the US, will be serving as executive creative director on Sony Online Entertainment's upcoming as-yet-unnamed DC Comics MMO.

Can an artist make games, though? According to Sony, Lee is an avid gamer who has played many MMOs. He says that, while he will keep a close handle on the tone and feel of the game, he'll let SOE developers do what they do best in terms of the actual game design.

Not that he doesn't have his own ideas: "One of the cool things about the DC universe is that there are different eras and multiple realities," he says. "I think there are interesting things that could be done by having characters have adventures in different timelines and different worlds. Like, take the comic book mechanics and apply them to a game."

Those familiar with Lee's work will find that the game's style is modeled very closely on his. "Initially we were looking at using a style that'd work just for the game, and I didn't want to throw my own style into this," he says, "but I would be less helpful if that were the route we were going, so we decided that the game would be stylistically based on the work I had done." Lee's own studio, Wildstorm Productions, will be heavily involved in development, and he is in close contact with Sony Austin to ensure that collaborating artists and game designers are on board to make this as close as possible to the DC Comics that people know and love.

But what about the competition? Lee has played *City of*



Heroes/Villains, but he didn't stay with it for long. "I didn't want to be influenced by the way they handled it," he says. Nor is he going to look toward the Marvel Comics game announced for the Xbox 360. "We want to do our own thing, and let the competition react to us."

In other news, while nothing is official, SOE president John Smedley has expressed interest in making the title cross-platform compatible, allowing PS3, PSP, and PC owners to play together. —Cindy Yans

MOBS & FRIENDS



The Gnomes knew that Christmas can't come from a store. The Gnomes knew, perhaps, there's a little bit more. And what happened then....? Well, in Westfall, they say, they targeted Santa and blew him away.

Mind Games

Perplex City promises to mess with your head, and fill someone's wallet

Perplex City is one of those games that defy simple description. Equal parts puzzle game, collectible card game, online alternate-reality game, and global treasure hunt, it adds up to a total that's incredibly elaborate and mind bending. The story goes that a powerful object, the Receda cube, has been stolen from Perplex City, a fictitious parallel world, and brought to Earth. Players must decipher clues and unravel the game's many mysteries to find the cube and earn the game's cash reward of \$200,000.

The clues to the game are hidden in puzzle cards. Each card is a standalone puzzle about the size of a postcard, and a pack of six runs you around \$5. Puzzles range from simple pop culture word and picture riddles to complicated math and logic problems, cryptographics, and hieroglyphic brain-melters. When you think you've got one answered, you log onto the Perplex City website, and if you're correct you get points. The rarer the card, the harder the puzzle, the more points you get. But that's really just the tip of the iceberg.

"The deeper elements to the game are the things we've hidden inside some of these puzzle cards," explains Michael Smith, Mind Candy's CEO and Perplex City mastermind. "The more puzzles you solve, the more you interact with the characters, the more you find out, the closer you get to locating the cube."

For example, the answer to one of the card's riddles is a phone number. Dialing that number yields an answering machine with an e-mail address, which leads to a website written by one of the game's characters that has even more clues to follow online. Some cards are even trickier, containing hidden messages in heat-sensitive ink, microscopic writing, or ultraviolet ink, and they have led to computer-based puzzles such as a thousand-level rolling ball maze with invisible walls or the task of hacking into a Perplex City skyscraper to find the identity of someone involved in the cube's theft.

So far, only about half of the cards have been released, with the final push scheduled to take place this summer and a second season already being planned. If you think your intellect is up to the test, you can check it out at perplexcity.com. —Adam Fleet

Two typical puzzle cards—math with a twist and map making, Perplex City style. On the left, find the equations in the graffiti and figure out what x equals. On the right, fill each section with one of four colors—red, green, yellow, or blue—so that no bordering sections are the same color and figure out what color the one marked with the orange "?" must be.



MMOBYTES



Turbine announced that *The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar* will now be copublished and distributed in North America by Midway....

Filmmakers James Cameron and John Landau have joined the advisory board for Multiverse Network, founded in 2004 to provide independent developers with networking and tools necessary to create competitive MMOs.

Multiverse CEO Bill Turpin says that Cameron intends to introduce one of his upcoming movies by launching a related MMO game before the film comes out.... Sony Online Entertainment President John Smedley told CBS that SOE had no choice but to implement the changes that many players call the "dumbing down" of *Star Wars: Galaxies*. "There's a reason that we did this," said Smedley. "The story... is kind of getting lost here... the game was losing subscribers. We had to make this game more accessible to a wider audience or eventually we would not have a business...." Earlier this year, at the Taipei Game Show, *Dungeon Runners* was revealed as the first single-player game that MMO-centric NCSoft is planning to bring to market.... Perpetual Entertainment's *Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising* will be co-published by SOE. *Gods & Heroes* has a squad-based strategy element that's not generally associated with MMOs.



ONLINE



For Instances, or Not

Two designers square off on the
pros and cons of creating small
“instanced” environments in MMOs

BY RAPH KOSTER AND BRAD MCQUAID



If one of the great appeals of playing an MMO is having access to a vast, expansive virtual world that's shared with thousands of others, what are players to think about instancing? For those unfamiliar with the term, it's what happens when you and/or a group of players leave the main "public" area and enter a private zone available only to you or your current party. Some designers believe that, if these zones remained public, it might offer a less interesting experience or even spoil the players' adventure—as in, there'd be tons of players everywhere you looked trying to do the exact same thing you were. Instead, when you access certain areas, you're transported to a unique "instance" of that area. In that "pocket universe," you can explore and plunder without being interrupted by other players. In a sense, they're the equivalent of a level in a typical single-player role-playing game, except that the group you're playing with can go there with you.

In theory, instances allow for richer and more fulfilling gameplay experiences. They make possible "triggered events" for any number of people, all of whom can simultaneously experience the stories or battles as the designers envisioned them, without the interruption of other groups. While they may provide better experiences, they do tend to ruin the whole "giant seamless world" aspect of the MMO.

There's a lot of theorizing on this topic in the MMO community, and here we present some of the views of two major industry figures: In one corner is Sigil Games Online CEO Brad McQuaid, one of the creators of *EverQuest* and the upcoming *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes*. In the other corner is Sony Online Entertainment CCO Raph Koster, who was creative director for *Star Wars Galaxies* and who's been around long enough to have helped *Ultima Online* out the door.

Brad McQuaid says, "Bring on the competition!" Let's start at the beginning; it is, after all, usually a good place to start. What is the origin of instancing? I'm not sure when and where it all started, given all of the variations on the theme that have been tried in various degrees over the last decades. In any case, we need to understand what sort of online game the designer is trying to create and then, from

those D&D experiences.

But what is your goal, your core game design? Are you trying to create an online version of your favorite pen-and-paper RPG where you as a player interact with only the others in your group, and you as the DM have quite a bit of, if not total, control over the environment? And, if so, is that all you're setting

touch of player-generated content, they could take what Bioware's *Neverwinter Nights* started and go much further with it.

Now let's switch to designers who want to make an MMO first but are also attracted to what instancing may (or may not) offer: Let's assume a designer doesn't like competition for resources or, at the very least, wants less competition than you see in a traditional MMO or MUD. Of course, we all (hopefully) agree that too much competition is bad.

Overcrowding is bad. Too few item drops are bad. Allowing a situation to occur where you basically have to ninja-loot if you want anything, even if you would have preferred not to and assuming there's no mechanic to stop you, is bad. Players end up fighting among themselves. Less-organized players, or players with less time to devote to the game, progress more slowly or are under-equipped relative to their level.

If you were a frustrated MMO player who really hated this—maybe some of your

"D&D isn't massively multiplayer. It's you, your group, and the DM... having multiple groups around is a problem." —Brad McQuaid



there, why instancing may or may not meet (or appear to meet) his needs.

Let's start with the old school. Perhaps the designers are big-time original D&D players. D&D isn't massively multiplayer. It's you, your group, and the DM. And if that is what you remember, cherish, and are trying to recreate, having multiple groups around is a problem. So, by limiting the number of people in any given area via instancing, you can make a decent attempt at recapturing

out to do, or are you also interested in something more, something you've seen or experienced in terms of gameplay that D&D didn't offer, but perhaps a MUD or MMO did? Have you identified that "something," and will it keep your core D&D game intact?

Who would want to do this? You could be dismissive and just call such a person old-school and outdated. But if they are also smart and forward-thinking and allow for a

Say What?

Just in case you're not up on all of the MMO lingo, here's a brief glossary of some of the terms used in this article.

Diku-style games These are games based on the original multi-player text-based adventure, DikuMUD, which was one of the first multi-user games to become popular as a freely-available program for its relatively addictive gameplay and similarity to *Dungeons & Dragons*. The acronym DIKU stands for Datalogisk Institut Kobenhavns Universitet, (Department of Computer Science University of Copenhagen) where DikuMUD was developed in 1990-1991.

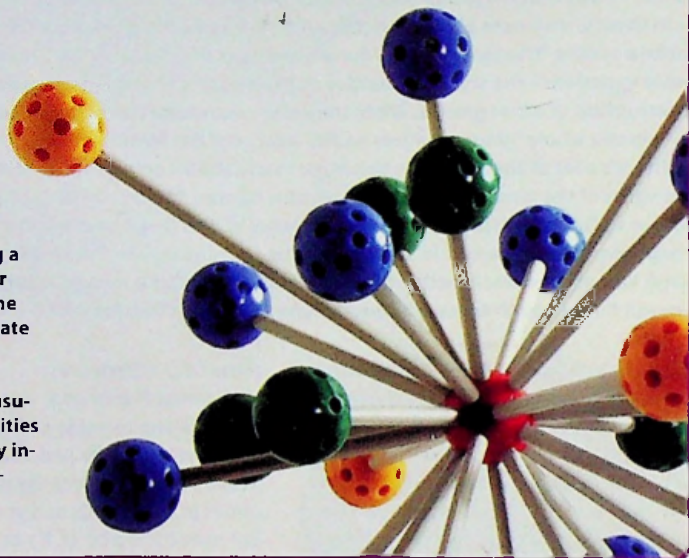
MUD A multi-user dungeon (or dimension, or domain) is a variety of old-style online game that's been around since the 1970s. It's usually text-based, and combines elements of role-playing games, hack-and-slash, and IM chat rooms. In a MUD, players read descriptions of rooms, objects, events, other characters, and computer-controlled creatures or non-player characters (NPCs) in a virtual world.

Duped content "Duping" refers to the practice of exploiting a bug in game software to create duplicates of unique items or currency. Duping can destabilize a game economy or even the gameplay itself, depending on the item duplicated and the rate at which duplication occurs.

Embedded games These are occurrences of "mini-games," usually smaller than the virtual world itself, which provide activities that may or may not be related to the main game. These may include instanced content, as well as small arcade games, or e-spectator sports.

J-curve J-curve theory attempts to explain the mobility of any social or economic phenomenon. The theory claims that after a prolonged period of growth, expectations rise. If, however, the growth rate slows down or falls—which can be graphically represented as the letter J sideways, hence the name—the expectations are unlikely to follow, but continue to rise. In the context of game sales, it describes the phenomenon where a game may not initially "click" (as it might have because of increased hype and promotion), but instead it enjoys a growing and extended popularity.

Hub-and-instances world This is a game structure that consists of a main public gamespace—either fully interactive and detailed, or simply a "matchmaking lobby." The game's predominant content takes place in one or more instanced areas that are accessible from the main hub.



worst memories are of some jerk or some über-guild stopping you from playing the game the way you wanted to, or in the order you wanted to, or at the rate of advancement you thought was right for you—then instancing certainly would appear to be an attractive mechanic and potential solution, as it does address these problems. However, there are two types of gamers. First, there are those who want to play a game where they are entitled to experience everything, obtain everything, and so on, merely because they pay the fee and put in some time (hopefully at their convenience). Then there are those who want more of a challenge and don't mind indirect competition and finite resources, and realize that, unless they really try hard, they're not going to achieve everything or see everything. But they also think that's fine—in fact, arguably, it makes the world more real. You can't see every square foot of the real world, after all. And you always

need something to dream about or another goal to reach for.

I believe all of that sense of "entitlement" to content actually precludes a sense of accomplishment and deep inner pride. But that's just me, and that's why there is thankfully more than one MMO out there. But what if you could reduce or even eliminate competition without instancing? And is competition always bad, or, like so many things in life, is it only bad when there is too much of it? And is it possible that we can figure out better ways in general of making advancement, even with competition, more fun? I say we have to. Death to the boring grind!

If you want to make a true, shared, persistent world, with a healthy player-driven economy and a budding relationship-building community; a game with a nice amount of competition and rarity and challenge so you truly feel accomplished when you earn something; a project where you don't

screw up and find out you need to dupe your content; a project where you are lucky enough to have the funding to make enough content for a truly popular and long-term-based MMO (I like to call it a home more than a game)... why use instancing at all? Better counsel would be to make a *Vanguard*.

Raph Koster's take In his piece on Instancing, Brad McQuaid categorizes possible game types that use instancing. The first type is a "pen-and-paper game, online," which is essentially a game that tries to recapture the charm and enjoyment of tabletop RPG-ing. The massiveness of such a project is the part to call into question: an "open big" game, which is apparently the way he thinks of *World of Warcraft*. In this model, you intentionally work with the business trend of the last few years, which is that games acquire the majority of their customers at launch, rather than going

through a steady growth period that perhaps (because of network effects) develops into a "J-curve" of rising subscriptions. (Of current games, *Eve*, *Second Life*, and *Runescape* all show strong evidence of J-curve growth.) The second type of game is a "hub-and-instances world," which McQuaid calls a hybrid of the pen-and-paper game and the MMO. This is, to my mind, what *Guild Wars* is, and it's a popular meme these days. I tend to think of these as being very much like *Diablo*, because the amount of gameplay in the "lobby" is limited. They are,



"My own take on instancing is that it's merely a form of embedded game." —Ralph Koster

fundamentally, session-based games with a degree of persistence slapped on top.

To my mind, these games lie at the edge of what might be considered a virtual world in the first place. A lot depends on the degree of persistence offered. An MMO that dabbles in instancing is the last type Brad cites—essentially, one that works within the MUD tradition but makes use of instancing as a tool. My own take on instancing is that it's merely a form of embedded game. A virtual world is ideally suited to embedded session-based activities. I see no mechanical difference between having people go into a Holodeck to do something and having people go into a pocket zone "chess world" when they sit down at a chess board, or go into a 2D shoot-'em-up when they sit down at an arcade machine in a virtual pool hall.

The difference in the experience, of course, is significant. Current instances are designed to feel seamless with the larger world experience. Achievements carry through, the interfaces are identical to those of the main game, and so on. But this is, to my mind, an underutilization of what instances can actually accomplish. It's approaching instances as a way to rectify perceived shortcomings in shared virtual worlds, rather than approaching them as a manifestation of the power of shared virtual worlds.

Similar interfaces, achievements' carrying between embedded games and the "main world," and so on are all details. The real question is whether you are designing a virtual world and embedding some small-scale games within it or whether you are

designing small-scale games and putting a lobby outside them to connect them. The mindset is best expressed with a diagram. To know what sort of game you are making, you need to know whether you are drawing a bunch of boxes with a hub connecting them, or whether you are drawing one box and putting a lot of little boxes within it.

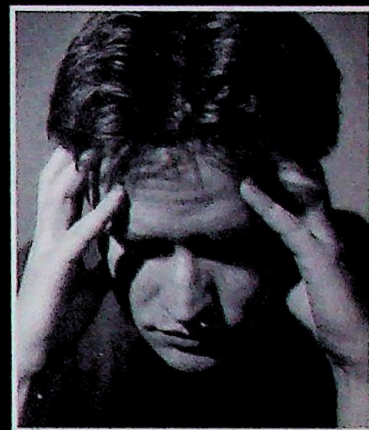
To my mind, virtual worlds with relatively few embedded games, such as the Diku-style games, are one big box with only a few smaller boxes inside them. The largest of the embedded boxes is the combat-and-loot game. And the "worldy" games are just ones with a lot of embedded boxes in them.

There's been a lot of talk about whether the day of the "worldy" games is over. The above is why I think it isn't. The trend over time is still, even with *World of Warcraft* out there, to have more and more embedded boxes in our virtual worlds. We may see that the quality level of each box keeps rising, but I have little doubt that, over time, users will demand more "rides" in their "theme parks," and not just more rollercoasters but more sorts of rides. The rollercoaster-only theme park fails if it doesn't have at least a few food stands, and, while the rollercoaster may always be the main attraction, the whole package includes everything from parades on Main Street to shops to concerts to convention hotels to go-karts.

The challenge is the budgets.

For even more in-depth discussions, visit Ralph Koster's blog at raphkoster.com, Sigil Games' forums at sigilgames.com, or for more a more academic look at various MMO-specific topics, try terranova.blogs.com.

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Let's Hunt Some Orc

The king of MMO PvP has its way with **Warhammer Online**, a world built for just that BY CINDY YANS

Developer/Publisher Mythic Entertainment Release Date 2007

The tabletop at Mythic Entertainment was nearly invisible, owing to its load of rule books, manuals, novels, game boxes, cards, miniatures, key chains, bumper stickers, paperweights, mugs, towel racks, and all manner of memorabilia related to its darling of the moment, *Warhammer*.

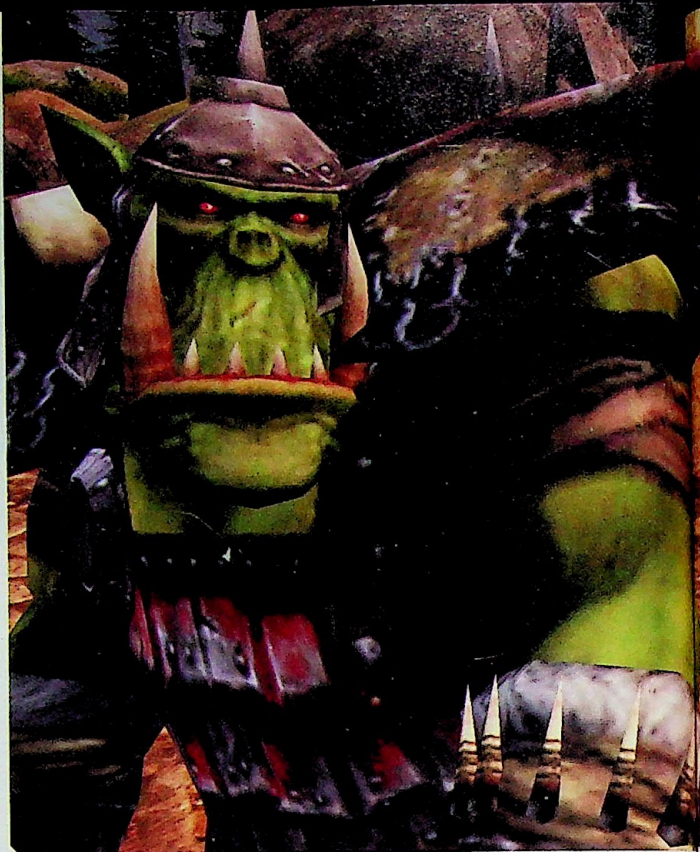
"Have you read these?" asked director of marketing Steve Perkins, proffering the stack of all 18 *Trollslayer* novels. "Uh... no." I felt guilty.

The idea of *Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning* has always been attractive, and when the original Climax-developed version was canceled in 2004, players were disappointed. At least they were until last year, when Mythic Entertainment announced that it had picked up the rights to the game. Mythic's *Realm vs. Realm* experience with *Dark Age of Camelot*, widely heralded as the most skillfully crafted player-versus-player MMO ever, bodes well for the game, as does the overwhelming unity of vision between Games Workshop and everybody (seemingly, literally every body) at Mythic. It is as though they speak with one voice.

When you look at the game, the first thing you say to yourself is "It's a rip-off of *World of Warcraft*." (You did, didn't you? When you saw the screenshots? Don't lie.) So it behooves you to recall that Games Workshop had them first, those Orcs, Goblins, Elves, and Dwarfs. From the original *Warcraft* to the present, all of that imagery is based on the original *Warhammer* figures. The characters are more detailed here, however; Orcs grow and expand as you level... they not only scale but gain musculature as well. One might refer to the art direction as *WoW* + 2.

Being green In the *Warhammer* universe, there are 14 known armies and lots of other races that are referenced, but in the initial release, we'll see only six (seven if you separate Orcs and Goblins, which most people do not). There are two loose alliances: Agents of Order—Empire (Humans), Dwarfs (not "Dwarves"), and High Elves—and the Agents of Destruction—Greenskins (Orcs and Goblins), Chaos (Humans), and Dark Elves. This provides for three battle-fronts: Greenskins vs. Dwarfs, Chaos vs. Empire, and Dark Elves vs. High Elves.

The game will have player-versus-player combat from the get-go, but people who don't care to participate in PvP can just as well carebear their way through the game entirely. Mythic has designed



"Orcs grow and expand as you level... they not only scale but gain musculature as well. One might refer to the art direction as *WoW* + 2."

the content in four "tiers" of areas, each of which has both PvE and PvP content, except on the PvP servers, where it's everywhere, all the time. As you approach a PvP area, a mysterious voice says, "There is no stopping in the red zone," and you become PvP flagged after five seconds. You can then choose to proceed, retreat, or say, "The white zone is for immediate loading and unloading of passengers only." Once you step back, you'll still be PvP flagged for five minutes, though. "What we don't want," says content director Destin Bales, "is for someone to go across the line, throw a fireball, then step back and go, 'Neener neener neener.'"

Faction friction One thing you'll notice is that, right from the start, War Is Everywhere. The core of the RvR combat is based on four layers of increasing sophistication. The first type is Skirmish Combat, where two guys just cross paths, hate each other, and fight. The winner will collect various rewards in experience, coin, items—they haven't really ironed out the specifics yet.

The second type is called Battlefields: these are basically hotspots in a PvP area to which players will naturally be drawn. For example, there'll be a ruined Dwarf village that may have some resources that are valuable to both sides. "We have so many proposals along this front that it's scary," says Bales, as he pats literally mountains and mountains and mountains of printouts of gameplay content. The next level is the Scenario, which is instanced, open RvR combat. The battles here are quick, repeatable, last about five or 10 minutes, and



While Dwarfs are often drunk and covered in filth, there's something just a bit noble about their demeanor.

will be objective-based, using many of the basic paradigms from CTF, Deathmatch, King of the Hill, et al.

We see instanced battlegrounds in things like *World of Warcraft*, but Mythic has taken a very important step toward improvement. If you've ever waited in a queue because the battleground population was unbalanced, cursing and complaining until you were either miraculously transported into the fight or died of boredom, this is for you. *Warhammer's* matchmaking utility not only

sorts people into groups of appropriate level but, when there aren't enough players on one side or the other, it does what RTSs have been doing for a long time: fill the spaces with bots (appropriately called Dogs of War). No waiting.

The overall victor of a Scenario will gain control of the entire zone (Skirmishes and Battlefield victories also come into play). This affects the fourth style of combat: the Campaign, which is, at the macro level, the heart of the game. In the fourth tier of

zones lies a capital city for each front, and the objective, as you may imagine, is to take over the opponent's capital and kill the leader and everyone else there (via Scenario). Afterward the victors will retain control for some arbitrary time, say 24 hours, during which they may pillage and plunder the city to their hearts' content. After that period of time, the game rebalances, forces you out of the city, and resets ownership of all the different maps, and the battle begins anew.



[above] The "younger" Orcs show a lot more skin than their seasoned compatriots—kind of like every female avatar everywhere. [left] Trolls are almost tree-like in appearance, rather like Treants or Ents, with a greater need for professional dentistry.



Quest-a-licious To move away from cookie-cutter mode, they've added several different quest types. First, there are public quests: when you enter an epicenter, you'll be taking and turning in quests, buying and selling, but you'll also see a public quest in which you and your entire faction can take part. For example, Orcs like to control giants by bringing them beer; they rush out and give the Giants beer; the Giants go crazy, and the Orcs bash the heck out of them. So if you enter a Giant area, the quest might be to bring the Giant, say, 150 pints of beer. Everyone who does it gets credit for it, as

how to complete them. Is your motivation cash? Experience? Then there are kill collector quests. Okay, here is one of the biggest peeves in MMO questing. You're riding a cock horse to Banbury Cross, you kill a fine lady upon a white horse, and another, and another, and another. You meet a banana mogul who says, "Hey! Those fine ladies really give me agita. I'll give you many Chiquitas for four of their noses." So you roll your eyes and go back and kill them yet again. Here, the guy would know that you had already done that and would reward you accordingly. "Hey! Bravo, you thwapped

does the whole realm. When these types of quests exist in a PvP area, they become competitive, with a different objective for each side.

Then there are branching quests, which let you choose

four fine ladies! Want some bananas?"

Finally, there's something they call "Christmas quests." These are far off the beaten path, require little to no effort, and offer huge rewards. The goal is to get the players to branch out and explore all the areas, lest an artist whine, "But they'll never see that texture—it was *my* texture." Here's an example of one: you come across a guy and his pet wolf, sitting on a rock, in the middle of nowhere. The guy says, "My wolf is starving. I'd give my right arm if I could get him some food." So you take him literally, whack the guy, his arm falls off, and you feed it to the wolf for a large reward. Sick, right? But special.

C&C The basic character system that Mythic is using is not a typical "class system." They're keeping some portions of the *Warhammer* universe and adapting others. "The career system operates along the concept that we want you to be able to choose an interesting start to your character's pro-

gression, sort of complete that chapter of your character's life, and then choose a new chapter," says lead designer Steve Marvin. So they're using a basic progression tree in which you start out as either a Fighter or an Adept (read "magic user") and then, at an arbitrary stage, you may choose your next career step either in the same path as your original choice or in a direction that moves you into a different career.

In essence, a path straight through in the same discipline makes you what, in other games, is considered "pure." Or if you like a more balanced, hybrid approach, you end up being what most think of as "multi-classed." You'd think that this sort of thing would be a real challenge to balance, but Marvin isn't worried. "It would be a real nightmare if we didn't have this kind of encapsulation that gives control," he says. "Because we split the Fighter from the Adept, we're not trying to balance all the magic with all the weapon attacks... that helps us."

The combat system operates on pretty familiar principles, but they've added a twist that will bring more versatility than is offered by most other games (that don't require "twitch"). Most systems only allow you to do one thing at a time. You have a resource (like mana or power), and you have actions that operate on a global timer, which are constrained by things like cost, casting time, recast time, and so on. Multiply by two. "We added the concept of a second layer," says Marvin. "So you'll have the ability to do two things at one time." They've added a second global timer that enables you to use other abilities in the same overlapping time pool, for the potential double whammy.

Mythic President Mark Jacob is certainly not being cavalier about his latest project. He senses the industry climate, and he's not afraid to admit that mastering the design of this burgeoning genre is a lot about learning. "We can do better," he says. "I don't mean we as just Mythic, I mean we as designers and developers of these games. We can do better... but no game is perfect. *Warhammer* won't be perfect. I guarantee you *Warhammer* will have moments of stupidity as well, but we'll just look at it and go, 'Why the heck did we do that?' because it so happens nothing that you can create is perfect. Creative things are flawed. Hopefully, here the flaws will be so few that the players won't mind." ■



A Tale in Space

Runestone plants a **Seed** of a different sort BY CINDY YANS

Developer/Publisher Runestone Release Date Summer 2006

Story-driven games aren't exactly scarce, but story-driven multiplayer games are. It's tough to keep thousands of players hooked on a story in the realm of *Groundhog Day*-like repetition that is the typical massively-multiplayer endeavor. The energetic Danes at Runestone, though, think they have the answer. Their idea? Advanced AI for the NPCs, flexible story-lines taking the place of quests, and a host of ways you can, individually, influence the game world.

In *Seed*, you take on the role of a planetary colonist, the result of a centuries-long experiment in creating a brave new world a long way from the old one. Fast-grown in an artificial womb in a terraforming tower on a distant world, you enter the game as a figurative newborn, about 18 standard years old, trained by dream therapy in a variety of technical skills. Unfortunately, the artificial intelligence running the colony, TAU, malfunctioned after a natural disaster some time ago and started pumping out too many colonists. Waaaaay too many. Resources are running out, tensions are rising, and decisions have to be made. Continue terraforming, or expand the tower? Hook up with Earth, or forget about it? Choices like that govern your path through the game.

The game blends a comic book look with techniques that go beyond true cel-shading

for a more three-dimensional feel and greater vibrancy. The stated model is European hand-linked comics, a niche Runestone seems to hit pretty well. What really sets the game apart, though, is the combat... or lack thereof. There really isn't any. "Conflict" there is aplenty—political, personal, professional—but it plays out through innuendo, gossip, blackmail, elections, and other non-laser rifle-related means.

The core is interaction with players, both human and game-controlled. The developers promise continual and heavy involvement in content expansion and creation, driven by the actions of the players. NPC's have memories, short and long—bug them when they're angry and you'll get nowhere, but come back when they're feeling good, or flash them a /smile emote, and maybe they'll be ready to assist you. The idea is to drive the game forward by your participation in, well, a story, one where you are in control. Need to bring someone something? Whether you buy it, make it, or steal it, the story will adjust to reflect your choice.

Will this work? *A Tale in the Desert* has attracted a small but loyal group of players, and *Seed* is very much like a comic-book art/sci-fi version of that gaming approach. It certainly won't appeal to the majority of current MMO fans, but it just might sow the seeds of a new type of online game, one where the play is in fact the thing. ■

out of the box

by Brett Todd

Spending Time With Old Friends

Maybe the lack of mod support for new games isn't such a bad thing after all

Okay, this has to be a record, even for a changeable guy like me. Last month in this space I was bewailing the decline of modding, noting how modern games are so complex that they're defying the best efforts of the homebrewers who made the *Half-Life* and *Quake* engines their bitches. This month, things seem positively upbeat thanks to my realization that the mod slump gives me more time to wallow in the past.

"This past February was one of the dreariest months I had in gaming since I dumped my ColecoVision in the basement in 1984."

You can now color me thrilled about the dearth of mod support for new games, because this recent dead zone has forced me to look at what's available for old ones. Also,

this past February was one of the dreariest months I had in gaming since I dumped my ColecoVision in the basement in 1984, despite *Empire At War*'s livening things up around Valentine's Day. So what was a poor boy to do but hit the Net and scrounge up new goodies for old games?

What I discovered chased the February blahs away. To my great surprise, the *Thief* franchise is still stealing hours from modders. Although the original first-person-sneaker series began way back in 1998 and has produced only two semi-successful sequels over the past eight years, a huge fan base continues to pump out fan missions. Hundreds of people are still devoted to telling more of Garrett's stories, mostly with the long, long out-of-date Dark Engine that powered *Thief II: The Metal Age* (although a brave few are playing around with 2004's better-looking if console-ish *Thief: Deadly Shadows*).

I'm still blown away by T2X: *Shadows of the Metal Age*. This unofficial expansion pack for *Thief II*, which I got into so

thoroughly in February that I forgot to get my wife a Valentine's Day card (that's my story and I'm sticking to it), is the best total conversion that I've ever played. It is easily the best mod of 2005, even though it didn't attract much attention because of the cult status and age of the game for which it was built. Even I forgot about it when picking the mod of the year for our awards issue and chose Garry's Mod for *Half-Life 2* (which is good within its limitations as a software toy/ool, but not T2X good) instead.

Another graduate of the now-legendary gaming class of 1998, *Half-Life*, also remains huge with modders, presumably because of the Steam revamp and the ability to make it fly without owning a videocard with the horsepower of a Honda Civic. Sure, the game isn't exactly pretty when propped up beside its younger brother, powered by the vigorous Source engine. But it continues to provide enough oomph for modders to concoct some really compelling mods and total conversions.

Gamers continue to pay attention, too. One of the most popular mods at the *Half-Life 2* Files website is *Earth Special Forces*, a *Dragon Ball Z* total conversion. The top 20 also features other blasts from the past that are still going strong, such as *Natural Selection*, *Sven Co-Op*, and *The Trenches*.

Mod support for these senior citizens isn't out of the ordinary. Sizable communities are still cranking out mods for just about every big hit released since the 486 era. *DOOM* came out in 1993, yet Jaako Keranen spent part of 2005 working on his jDOOM mod that ports the original game into Windows via the magic of the enhanced Doomsday engine. He's also toiling away on similar upgrades of *Hexen* and *Heretic*. Entar continues to work on his Vengeance eye-candy mod for the original *Quake*, even though the game is about to celebrate its 10th birthday.

Modders are keeping more than just old shooters alive. A beta version of Steve Smith's *Gundam Annihilation*, a total conversion for the *Total Annihilation* starring everyone's favorite giant Japanese robots, just hit the web at the beginning of 2006. The Maker continues to plug away on his *Patriarchs of the Chimera* mod for *StarCraft*. *Neverwinter Nights* is a kid by comparison with the abovementioned, having hit stores as recently as mid-2002, but it's only getting stronger as it ages. There are thousands of modules online, and fantasy epics are being produced on the eve of the release of *Neverwinter Nights II*. The same goes for *Morrowind*, which adds to its list of plug-ins on a daily basis even as the *Oblivion* sequel is going gold.

Even though I'm still a bit down over the end of the id Software-fueled golden age of mods, it is clear that the mod community is still going strong—at least when it comes to oldies but goodies. Now, if only Team BG would get back to adding campaigns to *Baldur's Gate II*, I'd be one happy, nostalgic camper. ■

MODSQUADS

1 Skin Flicks

Here's one nekkid skin that you don't have to feel quite so skeezy about downloading. Valentine b2K Panchin's Go Nude mod for *The Movies* actually serves a purpose for auteurs who want to make provocative R-rated fare, as it allows them to fully disrobe starlets. All female models will bare all after the installation of this mod, so you'll no longer have to compromise your script with those cheesy bathtub scenes where bubbles and quick cuts obscure naughty bits. Of course, nobody's insisting that you be classy with how you use Go Nude, so feel free to remake *Behind the Green Door* if that's where your artistic vision takes you. Now all we need is a male edition, uh, for the sake of equality. vgpro.com/file/5887_the_movies_nude.rar.html



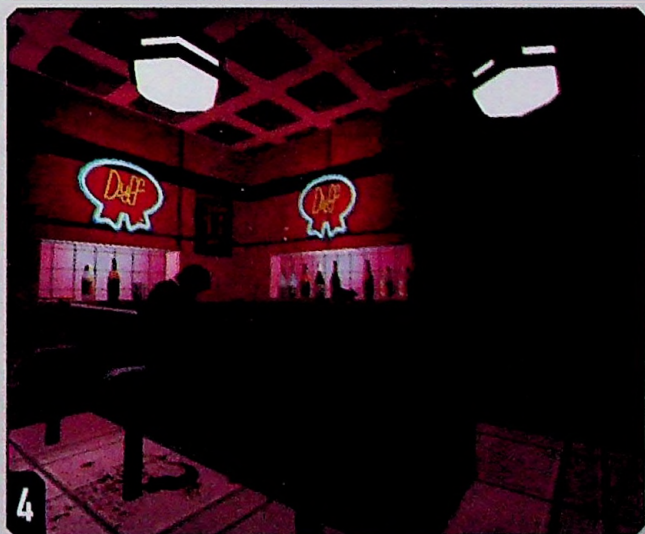
2 The Return of DOS

Just to carry on the oldies theme from the opposite page, we'd like to note that you don't absolutely need specific mods to play ancient DOS games on modern Windows PCs. You can actually emulate those x86 days of a decade and more ago with DOSBox, an ingenious 1MB utility that makes old games think they're being run in the cozy DOS environment of yesteryear. It comes complete with sound, mouse support, and an easy (well, *easier*, at any rate) way to tweak memory allocation. Other users have created front ends for DOSBox, too, so you don't have to go so old school that you're stuck at a C: prompt every time you want to fire up *Duke Nukem 3D*. dosbox.sourceforge.net



3 STFU and Download SHTUP

Sick of waiting for Irrational Games to get on with it and finish *BioShock* already? Stop sitting around moping and replay *System Shock 2* with the support of the eye-candy mod provided by the Shock Texture Upgrade Project (SHTUP). It smoothes over all of the rough edges and replaces the blurry textures of the 1999 game, turning visuals provided by the decade-out-of-date Dark Engine into something that's a little more acceptable in an era when gamers want to suck every last pixel out their 7800 GTX SLI rigs. This classic, creepy hybrid shooter/RPG is worth playing no matter what it looks like. But making it as pretty as possible sure helps matters, as the past seven years have not been kind to the Dark Engine (which wasn't cutting edge back in the day, either). shtup.home.att.net



4 Still Shocking

And after you have installed SHTUP and have blasted SHODAN into microchips again, grab Blaydes' "Return to the UNN" expansion pack. This excellent collection of six fan missions deals

with a UNN operative who goes up against his old bosses for reasons unknown after an assassination attempt goes awry. The 38MB mission pack features new art, textures, objects, mood-establishing voice mails, two possible endings, and full SHTUP support, so it looks as good as it plays. Just make sure you get the patched version that corrects issues with out-of-control enemy spawning over the first three levels; the original mod turned into the second (third?) coming of *Serious Sam*, thanks to hybrids that reproduced like homicidal bunnies. webpub.byu.net/dbr22

Runebound

Designers Martin Wallace and Darrell Hardy Publisher Fantasy Flight Games MSRP \$49.99 Players 2-6 ★★★★★

As some of us have found out through experience, nostalgia and boardgaming don't go together very well. Add the dangerous allure of eBay to the mix and you can easily find yourself shelling out big bucks to relive the magic of a game you loved when you were 12, only to find out you aren't 12 anymore.

Take *Talisman*. This long-out-of-print fantasy classic from Games Workshop is the ultimate boardgame heartbreaker, having morphed from a fondly remembered '80s sensation into a "Man, I blew

100 bucks on this?" bore in 2006. Still, there haven't been that many boardgames with a *D&D* flavor, so this was the only Elf on the block for years. Now, boardgamers with a hankering to check out cheesy art of bimbos in chain-mail bikinis can save a couple of shekels. *Runebound* is essentially a revamped version of *Talisman* without the clunky rules that make the oldie-but-not-so-goodie so drawn out and dull.

Basically, this adventure is a light fantasy RPG for those who don't have time for pen-and-paper role-playing. Much as in a standard *D&D* campaign, you choose a hero with specific skills, then roll dice to travel a map slaying monsters, collecting loot, and visiting towns to buy goodies and hire henchmen. At the end of the line are arcane dragon orbs and an undead dragon lord named Margath.

Although Wallace and Hardy don't break new ground here, they do set a brisk pace. Combat mechanics are

streamlined in comparison with pen-and-paper RPGs, but complex compared with *Talisman*. Battles are played out in four-phase rounds, and you roll skill checks to determine success in such varied endeavors as avoiding spiderwebs and convincing peasants to spill the beans on an evil witch.

The designers also provide the illusion of choice by allowing you free run of the map and the ability to set your own pace. You decide when you're ready to make the jump from one level of monster encounter to another in much the same way you make the call when choosing quests in an MMO. Battles come and go quickly, and you never have time to get bored because an adventure is typically wrapped up in under two hours.

Runebound feels a lot like "real" role-playing. It's no substitute for a true pen-and-paper campaign, but it's a tremendous improvement on the relentlessly linear *Talisman*. It's also a great way for RPG geeks to kill a couple of hours and keep their childhood memories unsullied. —Brett Todd



SPOTLIGHT: CLASSIC DOOM 3

You can't go home again. Or can you? After playing Classic DOOM 3 (cdoom.d3files.com), it's easy to conclude that Thomas Wolfe didn't know what he was talking about. This Flaming Sheep Software mod-in-progress perfectly recreates the shooter that put id Software on the map. It has been getting raves from both mod and DOOM-fanatic communities online in the wake of the release of version 1.0, which features remakes of missions one through eight of the "Knee-Deep in the Dead" shareware episode from the original.

Such acclaim is well deserved, too. Unlike the makers of a lot of recent, high-profile remake mod projects, such as the *Lazarus* take on *Ultima V*, Flaming Sheep hasn't bothered with adding loads of high-falutin' updates and frills to make an old game more palatable to a modern audience. This is pretty much pure, unadulterated DOOM, with zero additives and preservatives. While the game is rendered with the snazzy DOOM 3 engine, levels such as the famous opening hangar are recognizable, and all of the enemies and power-ups are right where id left them 13 years ago. The driving metal-style music is even back for another go. Strategies viable way back when are just as viable today, thanks to this remarkable attention to detail. Those with good memories will have a blast rediscovering levels.

Most of all, though, the mod serves as a reminder of how much shooters have changed over the years. What's really aston-



Forget about closets. The monsters in Classic DOOM 3 see no need to hide from one lowly space marine.

ishing is the speed. Today's games are slugs in comparison. It's shocking how much intensity this velocity adds to the game, and how much of a challenge it presents after you've spent the last decade or so methodically creeping down hallways, zeroing in on just a couple of baddies at a time.

But regardless of whether you look at Classic DOOM 3 as a trip down memory lane or as a way to check out what greybeards played way back in the early 1990s, this is one mod worth downloading. —BT

ALT. GAMES

Independent's Day

Moondance Games has released a collection of literally dozens of games from the Independent Games Festival called, cleverly enough, *Independent Games*. Moondance has done a terrific job of making everything as consistent as possible. You install the main *Independent Games* application and, from its menu, install all of the individual games. It also provides a summary and screenshots and, best of all, some information about all of these (mostly) unknown developers.

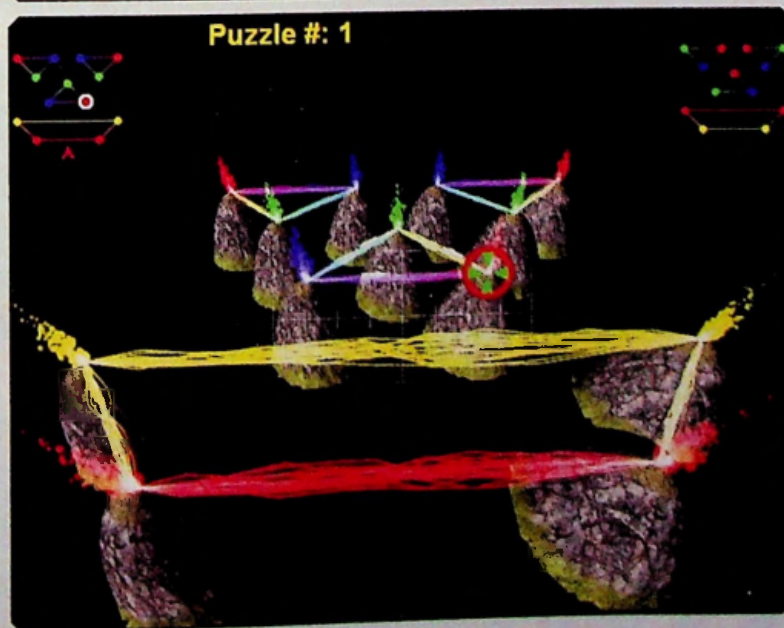
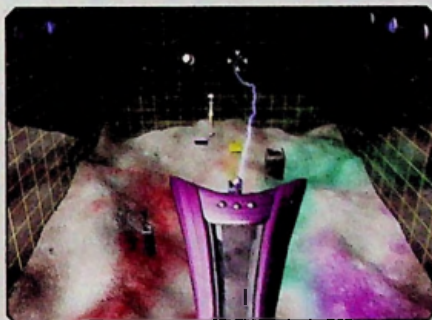
Over 40 games are included, most of which are the full versions. (There are demos of some of the more popular games, like Chronic Logic's *Gish*.) Some you may have heard of (*Strange Adventures in Infinite Space*), while others are head scratchers—*Sweaty Palms*, a

strange little dating game, anyone? There's *DDD Pool*, which doesn't quite live up to its name, the wonderfully minimalist *N*, and the impossibly entertaining *Bridge Construction Set* (also known as "fun with physics").

Overall, it's a quality package, but one of the stranger issues is that, while there are a dozen or more screenshots, only two games—*Dr. Blob's Organism* and *Global Defense Network*—are mentioned by name on the box. It seems an oversight to sell "independent games" as a concept without any mention of the games.

But who cares about packaging? It's ultimately about the games, and if you're looking for an entry point to the world of indy gaming, this is a superb one. —Steve Bauman

[bottom] Global Defense Network [below] Pillow Fight [right] Spin Cycle



MODBYTES



The *Thief* mod community is still going strong, almost eight years since the release of the original game. There are over 600 fan missions available, along with the fantastic unofficial *Thief II* expansion pack: *T2X: Shadows of the Metal Age*. Some of the latest and greatest missions at thiefmissions.com include Timon's "Forgotten Forest 2" and Sluggs' enigmatic "The Good Samaritan" for *Thief II*, and Bho's "Escape From Castle Black" for *Thief: Deadly Shadows*.... Valve and IGA Worldwide have "amicably" settled a dispute over the latter's unauthorized introduction of in-game advertising to *Counter-Strike* matches hosted by some online servers. A press release jointly released by the two companies in February even hinted that they would be working together. At least that's the only way we can take the line about looking "forward to discussing mutually beneficial opportunities in the future." Ugh. Does that mean we can look forward to seeing movie posters splashed around City 17 in *Aftermath*, or *Episode 1*, or whatever they're calling the expansion pack this week? ... Speaking of Valve, the Source-engine sequel to the *Red Orchestra* mod is now available for pre-order on Steam. No word yet as to when people will be able to start shooting Nazis in *Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41-45*, though.... Interestingly enough, a number of the most popular modules at the *Neverwinter Nights* Vault are French-language only. As of this writing, three of Fabien Cerutti's *Batard de Kosigan* adventures are in the top five, while Leviathan's "*Planescape: Le Jeu des Puissances*" is in the top 10. All are pulling ratings that make them inevitable Hall of Fame entrants, too, so give them a try if you *parlez-vous*....



READY FOR ITS CLOSE-UP

The Movies is turning gamers into indie filmmakers and moguls. Inside the phenomenon, and a look at some of the top Movies movies

BY BRETT TODD



It has never been easier to be an indie filmmaker. While we're not quite back to the heady days when Miramax was making overnight sensations out of new-wave auteurs like Steven Soderbergh, Lionhead Studios' *The Movies* is proving to be an interesting substitute. Especially if you want to craft films with your PC from the comfort of your own home, without the hassle of visiting Park City, Utah in the dead of winter and dealing with Robert Redford's ego.

All you have to deal with here is a mouse, keyboard, and the remarkably easy-to-use moviemaking tools that lie at the heart of *The Movies*. So it shouldn't come as any surprise that Peter Molyneux's most recent production is being embraced as a do-it-yourself Hollywood studio as much as it is as a real-time strategy game where you play movie mogul. Hundreds of flicks have been created and posted to the official web site, which over the past few months has become an online film festival.

Plan 9 This was all part of the plan for Molyneux and the rest of the team at Lionhead, who believed all along that directing wannabes would welcome the ability to whip up their own sci-fi epics and romantic comedies. While they say gameplay was always first and foremost in the design docs, they always hoped that simply making movies would be a big draw.

"We did think that the movie-making aspect would be huge, but I don't think the game is taking a backseat," says Molyneux. "It's just that people playing the game

The Shadow Knows In some ways, movie-making has overshadowed the actual game. The most vocal players are clearly into *The Movies* for the capability to easily and quickly crank out films without holding a casting call or trying to figure out what a grip does.

Some virtual directors are proving that they know their way around a script, too. Molyneux says he's most surprised at the amount of creative talent that is out there, and it's easy to agree. If you start browsing through the lists of movies uploaded to the web site, you can become lost in hours of entertaining short films. The selection isn't limited to the cheesy sci-fi operas and horror splatterfests that

place last fall in France. It has received newspaper coverage all over the globe from top dailies like *The Washington Post*, as well as from *Business Week* and MTV.com.

Molyneux is also a fan, saying that Chan's film put "The recent French riots... in context perfectly and was unbelievably powerful." The developer is very proud that his game is providing filmmakers with the ability to make such strong statements, whether they be political or personal.

Fahrenheit 486 But, while strong statements are being made, they're somewhat hampered by the limited number of backdrops and characters provided in the original game, as well as by the cartoonish approach of *The Movies*. Viewing the exact same city street and subway platform in one flick after another gets old fast, as do little touches like ringing telephones practically vibrating off desks and exaggerated movements straight out of silent movies. There's a bit too much corn in everything at the moment, which is a shame, considering the vision that some directors have shown.

Right now, though, *The Movies* is still very much the new kid on the block. The quality of films being uploaded to the web site has been improving almost every week, as auteurs discover new ways to manipulate the movie creator. With time, the addition of a few mods to liven up the scenery and tone down some of the effects, and some help from Lionhead (visit the Propshop on the official web site for sets and other goodies), things should only get better.

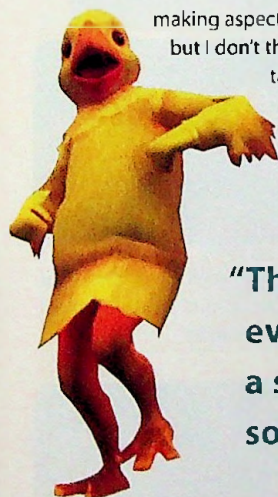
"There's a bit too much corn in everything at the moment, which is a shame, considering the vision that some directors have shown."

have found how easy it is to make their own films and that they have the flexibility to make any kind of movie that they want. What has been very exciting is the quality, variety, and scope of movies that have been posted.

"The thing *The Movies* is trying to do is to get anybody and everybody who plays the game to make movies. Lots of people I've spoken to played the game and almost stumbled upon the movie-making part. And then discovered they could make cool movies with any plot that they wanted."

you would expect from the geek gaming crowd, either. Almost every genre of contemporary filmmaking is present here, including incomprehensible (and subtitled) foreign films, action flicks, and even romantic comedies.

What's more, a lot of these movies are actually pretty good. One has even made something of an international splash. Alex Chan's *The French Democracy* has garnered praise for its mature portrayal of the cause and effect of the Muslim riots that took



Peter's Picks

So many flicks are being posted at the official web site of *The Movies* (movies.lionhead.com) that Peter Molyneux's faves are changing on a daily, if not hourly, basis. Here is a snapshot of what he was giving his personal thumbs-up to in February. Note: You can easily access the movies by adding the number at the end of each blurb to movies.lionhead.com/movie/, as in movies.lionhead.com/movie/43020.

Tales From The Subway Phone Booth

First in a planned series of vignettes that end in a subway phone booth, TheWolfska's latest opus is an ironic look at divine retribution for those who install voice-mail systems, set to a lazy jazz soundtrack. Future installments will cross all genres, giving viewers a taste of everything from horror to romance. **43020**



Fatal Touch Creeped out by Japanese horror? Then you should shiver to this dark, atmospheric little number, which deals with a gossipy student haunted by a former classmate who hanged herself. **33158**

Killing You A Week Ago! This crime-noir parody features the usual dame with a problem to be solved by a hardboiled private eye. Morgneto has packed a few chuckles into this one, most notably in the bar brawl between a flapper, a bum, and a Disco Stu lookalike with a huge afro. **43212**



A Is For Alice Honestly haunting, this film focuses on a man who has unwittingly sprung a plague on the world. Most of the tale is told through the interesting device of a former scientist reading an "ABC" book to his baby daughter. Great twist ending, too, though the story is so powerful in its own right that it isn't necessary. **28287**



Jesus Vs. Easter Christians with a sense of humor will love this slice of goofy surrealism in the Monty Python vein. Or at least they would have if the creator hadn't bowed to a few uptight critics and taken the movie offline.

Other Picks

Of course, we've got our own preferences as well, and they run the gamut from a couple of snooty dubbed foreign films, to lowbrow comedies, to crime noir:

B(R)EASTS One of the many French films with subtitles, *B(R)EASTS* blends womanly coming-of-age stuff about developing large breasts with lycanthropy. See what's more terrifying for a teen girl—getting a period or turning into a loup-garou, er, werewolf once a month. **36272**



Am Ende der Distanz A love story as only a deranged stalker from Germany could tell it. Somewhat incomprehensible and overwrought, but definitely very, very foreign, for those who like that sort of thing. **13860**

The Day I Turned Into a Babe This gender-bending comedy is actually a remake of the 1946 movie *The Day I Turned Into a Dame*. John Teller sucks back some bad wine coolers one day and wakes up as Jane Teller. Wackiness ensues. **32650**



The French Democracy

Maybe a little overrated due to all of the attention, *The French Democracy* is still an interesting example of what's possible with *The Movies*. And it is a balanced treatment of France's social problems, albeit one loaded with grammatical errors and burdened by a soundtrack more appropriate to a '70s cop show than a political thriller. **11520**



Tales Crime noir doesn't get much better than this private-eye saga about the usual hot broad with man trouble. Dave Carlisle has obviously read his fair share of Raymond Chandler, as the narrator here walks the walk and talks the talk without tipping over the edge into parody. **40618**



VAL Sci-fi for thinkers, inspired by Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot*. *VAL* tells the story of a robot "house helper" who rather desperately wants to know what it feels like to be loved. **24989**



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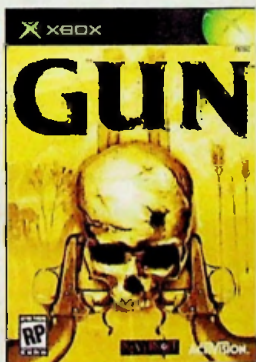


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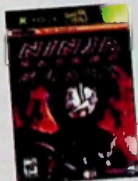
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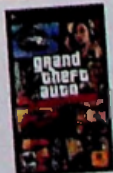


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CONSOLES

SO YOU WANNA BE A CONSOLE RPG FAN?

Because Dungeon Masters
need something to do

BY DOUGLAS ERICKSON



By now, every fan of PC role-playing games should have reached that last stage of grieving for their moribund genre: acceptance. In the past three years, that particular regular of the old-school gaming scene has quickly moved from a midlife reinvention circa 2001 into the dotage of half-baked Eastern European *Diablo* clones and console ports. We've got to accept that the good old days are over, and while the genre hasn't yet developed the embarrassing senility of adventure gaming—seriously, what's up with the nostalgia for *King's Quest*?—we've also got to find some entertainment to while away the dog days between the rare *Oblivions* and *Dragon Ages*. And no, trying to recreate *Legacy of the Ancients* as a *Neverwinter Nights* module doesn't count.

One way to deal with a starved RPG release schedule is to dig into the oversaturated, brightly colored candyland of console RPGs. But that presents its own problems. Where are the medieval European themes? The realms of dialogue trees? The living, breathing virtual landscapes with their clock-fixated NPCs and signpost small talk? Where, for the love of Gary Gygax, are the 20-sided dice?

Although on the surface the world of console RPGs may appear to be a lurid place, full of boyish heroes with hair only a New Jersey scenester could love and a crazy mash-up of themes that put spaceships in Middle Earth, in reality it's not so bad. Forget the big names—the *Final Fantasys*, the *Tales* titles, the *Wild Arms*—and look on the periphery of the shelves at your local game shop. A number of publishers out there, including Atlus, AGETEC, Nippon Ichi Software, and even some of the bigger names like Namco and Square-Enix, are releasing smaller, niche-ori-

ented titles that have a fair deal more in common with PC RPG design than do the anime-fueled quasi-adventure games that seem to dominate the market.

Champion of the Niche

Atlus, for example, is the champion of niche console RPG releases. It's stayed in business by releasing a steady stream of high-quality localized Japanese RPG and strategy game content for almost all of the major platforms, although the PlayStation 2 is where the action is.

Of most interest are the releases of *Wizardry: Tales of the Forsaken Land* and the *Shin Megami Tensei (SMT)* titles. The former title is a dungeon crawl easily comparable to the best of the early *Wizardry* series, but the *SMT* titles are special: They're unforgiving, brilliantly designed, third-person experiences that will test even the most cunning old-school RPG fan. (*Shin Megami Tensei* translates to "True Goddess Story"—it's



Atlus' *Wizardry* and *Shin Megami Tensei* titles are all top-notch console dungeon crawls.

rather meaningless overall, but that's a particular charm of Japanese console game design you'll have to become accustomed to.) *Nocturne*, the first of the PS2 *SMT* titles released stateside, is far and away the best, presenting a theme that fuses world mythologies together in a glorious, surrealist kaleidoscope through which you view its alternate reality environments.

The two *Digital Devil Saga* games that were released after it are a little more traditional—they have fixed characters and a greater emphasis on plot—but the puzzle-heavy labyrinths and brutal random en-



Balrog

HP 23
SP 7
ATK 16
DEF 13
INT 13
SPD 12
Hit 10
RES 13

Killed 3
Mana 27241

Gargoyle: A superior guardian of the Netherworld

Marona
Lv 100
HP 1505/1505

ATK 724
DEF 409
INT 1000
SPD 583

Steal 10 Guard 10%

Steal rate, Defense rate (Refer to "Battle Help")

I can only do this once, because I need to use this item I got from the Seraph!

Underneath the ghostly-sweet exteriors of *Disgaea*, *Makai Kingdom*, and *Phantom Brave* throbs the cold, many-columned pump of the fantasy-themed spreadsheet.

counters that compose the bulk of the two games should feel like a pleasant homecoming for the genre stalwarts weaned on the original *Bard's Tale* or *Wasteland*.

If you're willing to delve into Atlus's back catalog, don't miss the two *Persona* games, both of which revolve around Japanese cities merging with demonic realms. They're exceptionally deep games, and the last dungeon of the first *Persona* title trumps the difficulty of every turn-based first-person PC dungeon crawl in history. Yes, that includes *Ultima IV*'s abyss and all of *Wizardry III*.

It's in the Numbers

Nippon Ichi Software (NIS), unlike Atlus, prides itself on releasing games that are brushed with a distinctly anime aesthetic. But don't let the hyper-encephalic hobgoblins and four-color Lolitas fool you. Underneath the ghostly-sweet exteriors of some of their strategy RPGs—*Disgaea*, *Makai Kingdom*, and *Phantom Brave*—throbs the cold, many-columned pump of the fantasy-themed spreadsheet. In fact, the prime mechanism of these games is the idea that you, the player, have a funda-

mental need to horribly exploit the system to generate massive numbers, and NIS's designers have provided a seemingly endless array of ways to crank out super-characters, along with the challenges to match them. Put it this way: the level cap is 9999.

Characters can have strength statistics in the tens of millions. You can even level up your weapons. How can you hate that?

If you find yourself among the growing legions of NIS fans, though, be warned: Its *Atelier Iris* titles are bog-standard console RPGs that rely more heavily on saccharine artwork and adherence to anime cliché than they do on any fundamentally strong mechanics. A safe rule of thumb for those looking for more dragon-slaying and less *Dragonball* is this: If the game's cover prominently features little girls holding big swords or a montage of the androgynous staring pensively into the distance, chances are it's gonna be a linear little romp full of little folk emitting giant sweatbeads and an endless series of dialogue boxes scrolling tame innuendo. Not that such games are bad, per se. Just be aware of what you

Victor
10000 Mana

Need 50 Mana

Skill: Sword, Morningstar, Spear, Axe, HP+1, ATK+1, DEF+1

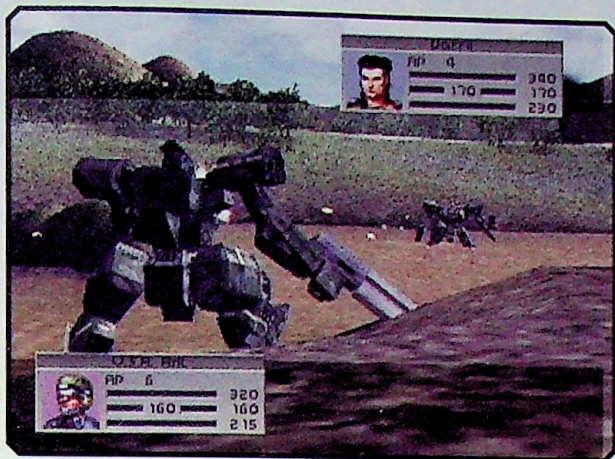
HP 110 %
SP 110 %
ATK 100 %
DEF 90 %
INT 100 %
RES 90 %
TEC 100 %

might be getting into and of the hazards to your unquestionably rugged gamer persona these types of games present.

Less cranky gamers have pitted their will against such things—or time found themselves dressed—as *Final Fantasy VII*'s Aeris, handing out copies of their fan manga at small-time anime conventions in Iowa. In the mildest case, you might find yourself writing articles like this one. Forewarned is forearmed.

Squared

When it isn't knocking out big-budget FMV showcases, Square-Enix (Squeenix to its fans; the resultant onomatopoeia seems to hold a special meaning) localizes and releases a number of really smart RPGs and strategy games that often innovate more than you'd think.



[above] Square's *Front Mission* series features an entertaining plot and remarkable depth for a console strategy RPG. [right] Old-school and ugly, *Dragon Warrior VII* is almost like playing a *Phantasie* title in fixed-perspective 3D.

In the days before Square and Enix merged into the monolithic geek content factory they are today, both companies made a good living off games inspired by PC RPGs. The story of both houses is reassuring. In the mid-'80s, a young developer named Yuji Horii found himself infatuated with the *Wizardry* games on the Macintosh and, sufficiently inspired, turned his cachet with software publisher Enix into the first *Dragon Quest* game (*Dragon Warrior* in the States) and triggered the deluge of similar-minded RPGs to follow. Likewise, *Wizardry* and *Ultima III* were a crucial influence on another young Japanese developer, Hironobu Sakaguchi, who went on to create *That Other Series* (*Final Fantasy*) for Square.

While many of the conglomerate's offerings have spun off into the realms of the strictly linear and cinematic, the *Dragon Quest* titles have remained fundamentally old-school. The most recent release features a massive landscape and the reasonably nonlinear play that has defined the series. Still, if the cel-shaded style and anime detailing leave you cold, the previous entry, *Dragon Quest VII* (*Dragon Warrior VII* stateside), is sufficiently homely in its rigorous adherence to the massive tile-based maps that suggest its roots in the classic *Ultima* titles, and the PlayStation visuals conveniently distort the Fisher-Price cast into iconic blobs of pixels. It's almost like playing a *Phantasie* title in fixed-perspective 3D! (Well, almost.) It's also over 120 hours long and is possibly the largest RPG ever created, the *Elder Scrolls* titles and their autogenerated content aside.

From Square, we get the *Front Mission* series of turn-based strategy games, which set their battles in near-future earth and ask the player to take charge of a team of giant 'mechs called Wanzers.



Analogous Adventures

It's a given that the markets for PC and console RPGs aren't exactly similar. Cranky PC types tend to prefer their Elf simulators in the "Excel-with-dragons" vein, whereas the PlayStation proletarians like their dungeon algebra hidden behind a psychedelic screen of real-time swordplay and spellcasting. Different worlds, right? Well, even if keyboards and D-pads are mutually exclusive in the minds of their respective adherents, there's a number of console titles on hardware both new and old that may play to the content-starved folks in PC country. Below are a few games that take their cue from similar PC RPG offerings:

Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance Nintendo, Gamecube
Deviously simple but ingeniously difficult, Nintendo's seminal strategy series has a long and storied history over the NES, SNES, and Gameboy platforms. The cartoon people may matter on between battles, but *Path of Radiance* is arguably the smartest of the series.
Similar to: Knights of Legend

Champions of Norrath SCEA, PlayStation 2
Gussied-up hack-and-slash. Not as deep or as well-balanced as the best of its PC brethren, but quite a bit more visceral. Try to forgive the cheesy *EverQuest* license. *Similar to: Diablo II*

Wizardry: Tales of the Forsaken Land Atlus, PlayStation 2
Classic grid-based dungeon crawling full of devious traps and monsters and featuring the Japanese take on an old-school license. *Similar to: Lands of Lore*

King's Field: The Ancient City AGETEC, PlayStation 2
Methodical, cerebral romp through a lost city, featuring cunning environment puzzles and loads of magical kit. *Similar to: Ultima Underworld*

Rebelstar: Tactical Assault Namco, Gameboy Advance
Turn-based tactical RPG in a science-fiction setting. Don't let the small screen fool you; it comes from a few of the folks who brought you the original *X-COM*. *Similar to: X-COM*



[top] Few games are as well-designed and all-consumingly addictive as NEC's *Culdcept* for PS2. [above] Akitoshi Kawazu's *Romancing SaGa* series was a big hit with the less orthodox console gamer.

Front Mission 3 (PlayStation) and *Front Mission 4* (PS2) have been localized for us English-speaking folks, with Part 5 on the way. Of all the Square offerings—excluding the awesome *Vagrant Story*—these are actually the most entertaining to follow, plot-wise. The theatrical geopolitics that set the stage for giant 'mechs to whoop one another's actuator-driven steel tushes are a well-penned indulgence, and the deployment of these giant tanks-on-legs is handled with just enough gravity to be believable. The level of customization is good, and the AI is among the better in a console strategy RPG series. It's no *Jagged Alliance* when it comes to depth, of course, but it's better than, say, *Fallout Tactics*.

The best Square games come from game design auteur Yasumi Matsuno. Previously, Matsuno was a designer at Quest, where he cranked out the incredibly hardcore *Ogre Battle* and *Tactics Ogre* titles. At Square, he

Square designer of note is the love-him-or-hate-him iconoclast Akitoshi Kawazu. A big fan of boardgames, Kawazu loves to experiment and overturn Japanese console design clichés, usually at the expense of fans' wallets. Some of his ventures are unqualified successes: the *Romancing SaGa* series (a remake of its first title is currently available stateside for the PlayStation 2) and *Final Fantasy Crystal Quest* were both big hits with the less orthodox. Other games are unquestionably bad; specifically, *SaGa Frontier 2* was a hodgepodge of narrative and game systems poorly married and unfortunately wrapped in some of the most stunning hand-drawn watercolor art ever seen. And some of his efforts are cryptic: *Unlimited SaGa* was a clever combination of traditional boardgame and classic RPG but was so poorly documented that it was utterly inscrutable. It needs FAQs for its FAQs, for the love of Werdna.

developed the wonderfully unforgiving and beautiful *Final Fantasy Tactics* on the original PlayStation, but he saved his best for last: *Vagrant Story*, a harsh, innovative dungeon crawl that really forced players to plan for and master the intricacies of its combat and equipment management systems. Recently, he led the team working on *Final Fantasy 12*, although he left it toward the end due to a bout of sickness. Despite a lackluster demo and a male lead who looks more like Charlize Theron than ought to be healthy, RPG fiends are still holding out the hope that *FF12* will be the best of both worlds: cinematic production values wedded to deep, thought-provoking gameplay.

The other current

In the Cards

Lastly, one of the most tragically overlooked titles for the PS2 is ill-fated publisher NEC's *Culdcept*, a fantasy-themed card battler based on an eclectic combination of *Magic: The Gathering* and *Monopoly*. It's incredibly hard to find a copy of it these days, but if you do, snatch it up posthaste: few games are as well-designed and all-consumingly addictive.

The big question is, where are the Western-designed RPGs? The answer is that there aren't many. There are Bioware's Xbox offerings, of which only the pretty but distinctly mediocre *Jade Empire* has remained unported to a superior PC incarnation. There's LucasArts' tactical RPG *Gladius*, which spices up a solid turn-based battle system with timed attacks. And there are largely forgettable titles like *Summoner 2* and *The Legend of Alon D'ar*, which encumber good ideas with bad real-time combat and wonky cameras. There's a whole spate of *Diablo* clones, ranging from a pair of *Baldur's Gate* sidestories to the *Champions* titles for the PS2.

By and large, though, it's a wasteland for console RPG development in the U.S. and Europe. Whether this is because it's considered a hard sell for marketing teams to pimp a genre where you can't pitch something like "It's *Command & Conquer* with the attitude of *Lara Croft* and the stealth mechanics of *Splinter Cell*," or because these games tend to be a bit opaque to outsiders, it's hard to tell. But the result is the same: the last two generations of consoles have seen the vast majority of their RPG games come from the East, and the situation probably won't change any time soon. ■



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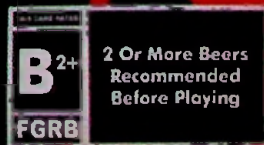
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Black is brought to you by the colors black, gray, and orange.



Shooter

The generic **Black** isn't quite the new black BY KELLY WAND



Genre Sub Halo Developer Criterion Studios Publisher Electronic Arts ESRB Mature Platform PS2, Xbox

Black opens with your mysteriously disgraced covert ops character reluctantly agreeing to recount the game's missions to his boss as a series of flashbacks rather than go to prison for life. This is a bit disappointing on two levels: 1) You know up front your guy lives, and 2) He's spineless. You'd think that, compared with running suicide missions, a lifelong prison term would sound like a holiday in Belize.

Black is all about shooting and blowing up stuff rather than spying or thinking. Granted, there are secondary goals you

need to discover on your own along the way, just as real spies have to in order to earn their weapon upgrades. These are grouped under deceptively engaging headings like "Blackmail" (i.e., shooting laptops) and "Intel" (i.e., autocollecting objects that you wish were health packs but aren't).

The goal titled "Destruction" is what *Black* is principally interested in. Where most shooters at least pretend that decision making and complexity lurk just beneath the surface of the gameplay, waiting to be discovered by the exceptional player, *Black*

peels it down to the shooter basics. Virtually all of the gameplay consists of navigating attractive, albeit linear, environments ranging from twilit woods to the Third World city streets littered with burning cars that any console shooter peripherally related to the war on terror would look naked without. Here you're blasting generic enemies and/or the flammable barrels near which so many remain witlessly stationed or toward which they inevitably stray, one eventual save checkpoint at a time.

Simplistic and overfamiliar, yes, but admittedly as diverting as that formula gets. *Black* also deserves credit for playing fair. When you clear an area, it stays cleared, leaving you free to scoop up your booty afterward. It may not sound like much, but not every shooter's so generous.

Your arsenal, a grab-bag of familiar muzzles that includes an AK-47, a shotgun, a rocket launcher, and even a BFG, generally handles well. The AI is just dumb enough to be fun, and the unrelenting cacophony of competing gunblasts and ex-



With an assault rifle, you can indeed fight city hall.

plosions are respectably unholy.

The game's proudest gimmick is having cover be either steadily or instantly destructible, from windows and walls you can shoot holes through to logs and crates you can chip away at chunk by chunk, *Breakout*-style. In theory, this adds more levels of tactical nuance, but the destruction levels in *Black* are fierce enough to render such dainty considerations quickly moot. There is also a depth-perception simulator, whereby your

background vision blurs every time you reload, even if you, the player, aren't looking at your gun. What it lacks in open-endedness *Black* makes up for in optometry.

A handful of vexing dealbreakers remain. There doesn't seem to be a jump button, although gaping wall holes and stacks of crates cry out for one. As in *Halo*, you can only have two guns at a time, which seems at odds with the game's declared philosophy. Your targets, indiscriminate armor-clad

blobs outlined by muzzle flashes and occasionally calling out in a vaguely Arabic tongue, don't appear to be doing much besides patrolling areas, which makes them terribly bland opponents. There's no map feature, even though you have radio contact with your colleagues, who you'd think might help you out when it comes to getting where you need to go. There's no multiplayer, and little incentive to replay the missions on harder difficulties. Worst of all, despite an M-rating, there's hardly any blood or even the strong language promised on the box. If you're going to get the M anyway, why not go for broke?

Black may not be terrible, but it's repetitive and mundane. On the back of the box, it says that "as a *Black* operative, you'll obey no laws." Then it proceeds to list "Five Rules of Guncraft" that you allegedly "live by." The first of these, aptly enough, is simply "Guns are the stars."

And that's sort of the problem with *Black*: too many bit players, not enough else on the marquee. ■



Resident Evil: Deadly Silence

Reach out and touch death

★ ★ ★ ½

Genre **Zombie Touching**

Developer/Publisher **Capcom** ESRB **Mature**

Platform **DS**

When Nintendo busted out its "Touching is good" marketing campaign for the DS, it's reasonably safe to assume that Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi wasn't thinking about rotting, undead flesh. Then again, who would have expected that Capcom would rehash *Resident Evil*, the granddaddy of survival horror, for a modern handheld audience?



The Remains of the Day



Chibi-Robo and his life of service BY TOM CHICK



Genre *Katamari-esque* Developer *Skip*
Publisher *Nintendo* ESRB *E10+* Platform *Gamecube*

Chibi-Robo is an unassuming fellow. Like Link and Gordon Freeman, he doesn't talk. His basic task is very *Pikmin*: He's on a timer every day as he sets out from his tiny house into a big world. He takes on whatever quests he will in the time (and battery life) he has. But unlike the *Pikmin*, who are travelers and a conquerors, Chibi is strictly domestic. He's in the service of a moderately dysfunctional family. There's the exasperated mother, the father with a full-blown case of arrested development (he represents you, the gamer), and the little girl who, well... let's just say there's something not quite right with her. Don't be too quick to trust the teddy bear.

This is the parlor drama into which Chibi steps daily, racking up "happy points" by feeding fish, letting the family vent to him, or just tidying up. Lord, what slobbs these mortals be. Especially that stupid dog.

There's always something to do in *Chibi-Robo*, which spreads goals liberally before you. The design is gentle and demure, balancing gracefully on that line between challenge and aimless freeform-ing. The puzzles, inasmuch as you could call them that, are neatly folded into the world for you to work out at your own leisure. They're bound up with a tight internal logic that leads to some gratifying "a-ha!" moments.

Considering how derivative it is (the developers at Skip have obviously watched *Toy Story* so many times that they have no qualms about openly cribbing a few of its characters), *Chibi-Robo* feels new and unique. It's partly the location, which plays beautifully on whatever shreds of cleverness might have lurked in those forgettable *Army Men* games. This is what it's like when you're one inch tall in as everyday a location as you



[top left] And a child shall hold him. [top right] Do not trust the bear. [above] This toy "inspired by" Lego.

could imagine. The kitchen table is a mesa. A lamp is a tower. The drains under the sink are dungeons. A dollhouse is a glorious palace. The master bedroom might as well be another country. And outdoors? Who are you kidding? It's far too big out there. But it's all built with an uncanny knack for the tricks of good level design.

The distinctiveness is also partly in the artwork. The world is colorful and overbearing, rounded and bright, stuffed with exciting things to see and do. Chibi himself is a minimalist tin man whose chief form of expression is blinking innocently. He's a Lego version of Gort from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. As you play, a large cast of characters is gradually revealed, as is the household itself, as is Chibi's Swiss Army knife versatility. It's all very picturesque and picaresque.

There's a fair bit of plot to unfurl in *Chibi-Robo*, but it's duly earned and well worth the watching. You're in a carefully written story with some genuinely affecting moments despite all the weirdness. The story is ultimately about many of the same things as Miyazaki's best movies, which depict the world as a big, strange place where you go to grow by helping others. And it's another clever import from Japan that will remind you why you're not done with your Gamecube just yet. Last-generation talent will always trump next-gen technology. ■



There are bugs in this game.

And yet here it is, all crammed into a tiny, portable DS package. The great BOO! moments, the grainy graphics, the mutant canines, and the biggest slice of limburger ever, the bust-a-gut horror of the voice acting.

For the most part, tooling around in and under this haunted mansion is as good (and spooky) as you remember it.

Anyone who's savored the joys of the over-the-shoulder view from last year's *Resident Evil 4* will find it painful to go back to the original's disorienting cinematic camera angles. The D-pad controls don't help. Expect cheap death aplenty in the early going, especially if you opt for Jill Valentine instead of hard-guy Chris Redfield.

The real draw here is the game's new Rebirth Mode, a spitshine that not only adds to the number of zombies slouching toward you—think three in a room instead of the usual one or two—but also incorporates some nifty DS features. You use the stylus to solve brainteasers and the microphone to give a fellow S.T.A.R.S. soldier mouth-to-mouth (blow, baby, blow). Every so often, you kick abruptly into first-person view, where you deploy the stylus like a Ginsu,

slashing the screen to wound whatever's coming at you. These bits are initially jarring, but they're one of the few points at which you actually enjoy a decisive competitive advantage over the brain-munching hordes.

Normally, mining the license library to populate new hardware is a move that smacks of laziness and creative bankruptcy. In this case, Capcom seems to be on to something. —Aaron R. Conklin

Rub Rabbits

Not quite feeling the magic

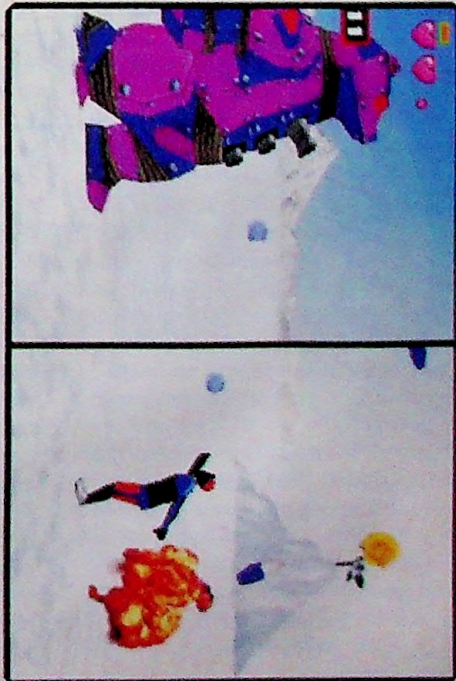
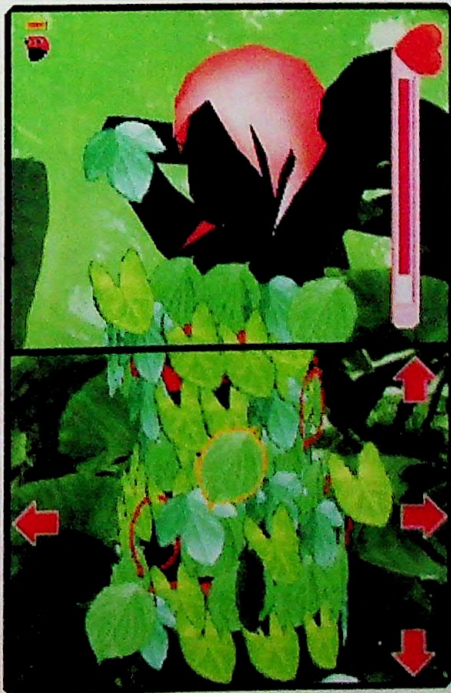


Genre Weird and superficial
Developer/Publisher Sega ESRB Mature
Platform DS

When the Nintendo DS first came out, there wasn't a lot of stuff that showed off what it could really do. Most of it was bright and colorful in that Nintendo way that makes you stammer out an excuse when an adult walks into the room. That's what made *Feel the Magic* one of the best launch titles. It was unique, new, weird, and engaging.

What a difference a year makes. Along

[left] Anyone have a defoliant? [right] Please turn your DS sideways.



comes *Rub Rabbits*, which sounds like something from the Cartoon Network but is really a sequel to *Feel the Magic*. It walks into a room full of DS celebrities going, "Hey, everyone, remember me?" Which we do.

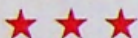
So maybe we play a few of the minigames before realizing that a DS is squandered these days if you're frantically scratching the stylus across the touchscreen with all the finesse of a lotto player trying to get through a stack of cards. Yeah, there's some funkycool artwork going on underneath that touchscreen. You can't help but chuckle and wonder what on earth they were thinking (drinking? taking? smoking?) to come up with some of these minigames, which are supposedly about one poor schlub's efforts to meet a really hot chick. Beyond that, there's no making sense of anything.

There's more replayability this time in the form of secret collectibles. The weird multiplayer is designed to work with a roomful of people and one DS, which is an admirable effort to draw in the nongaming crowd. But they're probably better off being shown *Nintendogs*. As for the actual minigames, suffice it to say this is no *Wario*. "Odd" will only get you so far before "frustrating" kicks in. If you've got a Nintendo DS, there are just too many better ways to, ahem, feel the magic. —Tom Chick



Full Auto

The need for speed. And guns.
Lots of guns.



Genre Urban Renewal

Developer Pseudo Interactive Publisher Sega

ESRB Teen Platform 360

What game isn't better with a shotgun? *Full Auto* is no exception. A racing game based on the idea that you'll also want to blow stuff up, it doesn't stop with the shotgun. It's a showcase for the greatest strength of "next-generation" consoles, because it puts stuff on-screen that no other console could manage. Every explosion and subsequently crumbling edifice is a mini-cinematic effect that you can enjoy all over again with an excellent one-touch replay. Gratuitous use of the 360's bag of special effects adds to the over-the-top devastation. And you're not just blowing things up for fun; you get to do it for points that lead to awards. It's especially hard to resist blowing up just one more tanker truck when a gold medal might be on the line.

Oh yeah, there's also racing. You've got circuits, point-to-point, there-and-back-again, and other staples of the genre. Head On is the clever option. The field is split in half, so you're passing one another in a high-speed game of chicken on every lap. It's all about the arcade action, so don't worry if your car disintegrates. As you tear



up the scenery, you earn "unwreck," which you can spend to rewind time and try to miss that oncoming car, dodge that mine, or take that turn a little tighter. This instant do-over option is probably *Full Auto's* most innovative feature, and it gives the game a unique sensibility. The whole thing comes together like *Crazy Taxi* on 11, but without all those silly people to pick up.

It's not all Smith & Wesson crossed with Ferrari, though. There's a touch of Edsel in here. There's some nasty slow-down that tends to undermine the heady feeling of speed and violence. And, believe it or not, blowing things up does get tiresome. When you lose a race for the 10th time because of the AI's catch-up logic and its uncanny knack for only shooting at you when you're about to win, the controller is liable to go flying. The single-player stuff works you through the basic unlockables, but multi-player performs superbly on Xbox Live. Unfortunately, too much time is spent waiting to load instead of driving and shooting.

Full Auto couldn't have a more appropri-

ate publisher. It definitely recalls the glory days of Sega's Dreamcast and Saturn. It's missing the polish of the games from that era, and it eventually succumbs to a samey sameness. But until it reaches that point, it satisfies the need for speed and shotguns.

—David J. Long

Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror

Wild. Orchid?



Genre The Little Shooter That Did

Developer/Publisher Sony

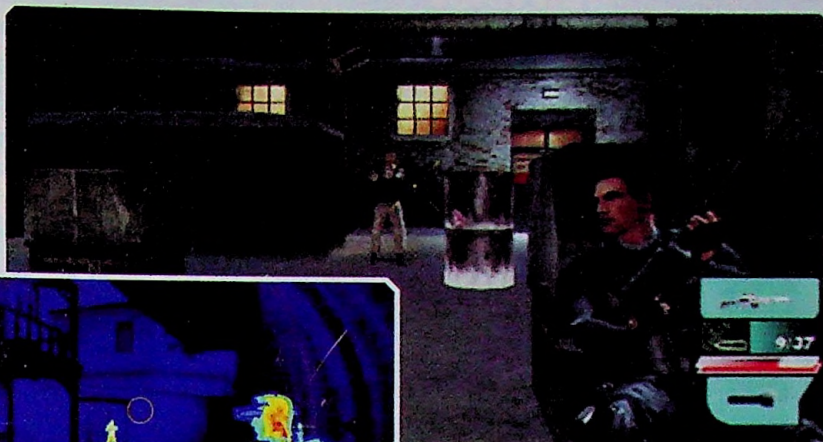
ESRB Mature Platform PSP

The question you have to ask yourself when you're really digging a handheld game like *Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror* is "Do I like it because it's good, or do I like it because it's good... for a handheld game?"

In this case, a lot of the appeal is the second part. You've got a surprisingly full-featured shooter slickly adapted to Sony's PSP. It looks great... for a handheld game. Everything is neatly divided into bite-sized episodes, so you're not walking down hallways from setpiece to setpiece—imagine fast-forwarding through a trashy action film to get to the good parts. It does a superlative job of adding replay value with the standard console gimmick of unlockable content. You want that really cool Gatling grenade launcher? Okay, then you have to earn your level-four combat specialist badge by replaying missions and trying to get as many knife kills as you can. And it's got full support for a bunch of multi-player game types online. It

bodes well for the PS3 to see Sony doing online support so right with their PSP games.

But the first part of the question—"Do I like it because it's good?"—also clearly applies to this *Syphon Filter*. It has good AI that dovetails with a gratifying system of firing from behind cover. There are lots of distinct guns that handle differently, a set of vision modes with balanced gameplay effects, and some fancy toys like a sniper rifle that also shoots tranquilizers, sticky bombs, and shock darts. If you take time to set up kills by hand, you'll be treated to some luridly animated stabbing and neck snapping. There's also frying people to death with a taser, pushing them in front of trains, and the "F"



[left] Infra-Benson view. [above] Waiting for Benson.

word. In many ways, *Syphon Filter* out-Splinter Cells *Splinter Cell*, a series whose single-player content has gotten lazier as it's gotten more gorgeous. But here, you've got a limber set of combat sandboxes and a toy box brimming with goodies.

There's even a story-line, but it soon loses focus and fumbles around a bit trying to find it again. Something about an orchid in the Arctic, a break-up in the rain, and finally a guy too clueless to understand the implications of a shoe too big for a 10-year-old. It's mainly stuff to read on the loading screen, but there are some delightfully goofy bits: a hapless tortured UN soldier ("Say what again!"); a female sidekick appar-

ently named "Leon" to those of us who've been playing *Resident Evil 4*; and a final boss who taunts you as a way to provide backstory at precisely the wrong time (i.e., about three minutes before the game is over).

"How many people have betrayed you?" he calls out while you trade shots with him.

"First there was Benson. Remember him?"

"No," you're thinking. "Who's Benson?"

Lord only knows what's supposed to be going on in the bonus missions, which start off with you assassinating of a pair of lesbians.

It's all a reminder that there were other *Syphon Filter* games before this one, and that someone other than you has apparently been buying them. Which is good news, because otherwise Sony wouldn't have provided the PSP with its most satisfying and generous shooter. —Tom Chick

Untold Legends: The Warrior's Code

Sony/Teen/PSP ★★½

Being the sequel to a hack-'n-slash RPG that launched with the PSP, *Warrior's Code* has learned a few important lessons: 1) Look better, 2) Don't be such a hassle with the loot, 3) Make the fighting more interactive, and 4) Let us play online. Great job on all counts. What it hasn't learned is a more subtle and important lesson: If you're going to hand build the levels instead of randomly generating them, you're going to be given a lot less slack if you're repetitive and tedious. But for the time being, this is as close as you're going to get to *Pocket Diablo*, and that counts for a lot. —TC



Exit

Ubisoft/PSP/Teen ★★★

This clever puzzle/platform game is a better showcase for the PSP than all of the lousy 3D games trying to turn a handheld into a mini-PlayStation. Sporting some of the best art direction in a videogame right now, it gives you the role of Mr. ESC, an "escapologist" who needs to rescue people from various buildings. You herd people around *Lemmings*-style, as each person has various roles they can fulfill, and they tend to act kind of stupid unless you explicitly tell them what to do. It's harder than it looks. But since there's little to no variation in the ways to "solve" each of the 100 levels, it's a one-time-through kind of game, a better rental than a buy. With its jazzy score and terrific art design, it's a sublime bit of style over substance. With most games seemingly afraid of not being generic, that goes a long way. —Steve Bauman



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applied game theory BY HENRY JENKINS AND KURT SQUIRE

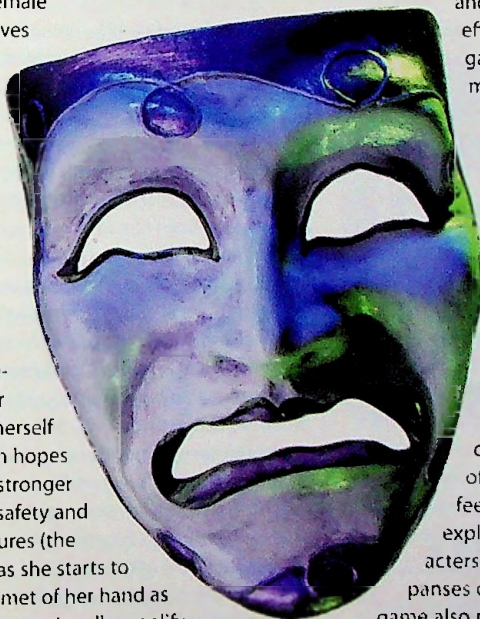
Emotions in Motion

Want to design a game to make us cry? Study melodrama

Don't snicker, o ye hardcore gamers. Although we associate melodrama with the soap opera—that is, “girly stuff”—it appeals as much to men as women. Sports films like *The Natural* or *Seabiscuit* are classic examples and, in fact, most action-oriented genres are rooted in traditions from 19th-century melodrama.

The best contemporary directors of melodrama include James Cameron, Peter Jackson, Steven Spielberg, and John Woo. They combine action elements with character moments to generate a consistently high level of emotional engagement. Consider a scene from Cameron's *The Abyss*, during which the male and female protagonists find themselves trapped in a rapidly flooding compartment with only one helmet and oxygen tank. Games include puzzles like this all the time, but few have achieved the emotional impact of this sequence.

Cameron deepens the emotional impact of this basic situation through a series of melodramatic devices: playing with gender roles (the woman allows herself to go into hyperthermia in hopes that her ex-husband, the stronger swimmer, can pull her to safety and revive her); dramatic gestures (the look of panic on her face as she starts to drown and the slow plummet of her hand as she gasps her last breath); emotionally amplifying secondary characters (the crew back on the ship who are upset about the woman's choice and work hard to revive her); abrupt shifts of fortune (a last-minute recovery just as we are convinced she is good and truly dead); performance cues (the rasping of the husband's throat as he screams for help); and an overarching emotional logic (she is brought back to life not by scientific equipment but by human passion as her ex-husband slaps her, demanding that she not accept death). When the scene ends, absorbed audiences gasp because they forgot to breathe. Classic melodrama depends upon dynamism, always sustaining the action at the moment of maximum emotional impact.



Critics might argue that these conventions are unique to film, but most of these techniques are within reach of today's game designer. The intensity and scripted-ness of a scene like this couldn't be sustained for 40 hours of gameplay, but it could be a key sequence driving other events. Classic melodrama understands the need to alternate between downtime and emotional crisis points, using abrupt shifts between emotional tones and tempos to further agitate the spectator. And, though we often associate melodrama with impassioned and frenzied speech, it can also work purely in pantomime, relying on dramatic gestures

and atmospheric design. This technique is used effectively for fun or whimsy by platform games (think *Psychonauts*), but few use it for melodramatic effect.

“Some of the most emotionally compelling games are beginning to embrace melodrama.”

Some of the most emotionally compelling games are beginning to embrace the melodramatic. Take, for example, the now classic game *Ico*. The opening sequences work to build sympathy for the central protagonists and use other elements of the *mise-en-scène* to amplify what they are feeling at any given moment. The designers exploit the contrast in scale between the characters' small physical builds and the vast expanses of the castles they travel through. The game also relies on highly iconic gestures to communicate the protagonists' vulnerability and concern for each other's well being.

One lesson that game designers could take from classic melodrama is to recognize the vital roles that third party characters play in reflecting back and amplifying the underlying emotions of a sequence. Imagine a scene from television drama where a mother and father fight in front of their child. The active characters will carry some of the emotions as they hurl words at each other that express tension and antagonism. But much more is carried by the response of the child, cowering in the corner with fear as the fight intensifies; perhaps giving its parents a look hopeful for reconcili-

ation. Classic melodrama contrasts the actions of the protagonists and antagonists with their impact on more passive characters, giving us a greater stake in what is occurring. Historically, games have remained so focused on the core conflict that they spend little time developing these kinds of reactive third party characters; most NPCs are seemingly oblivious to what's happening around them.

Finally, the term "melodrama" originally referred to drama with music, and we often associate melodrama with swelling orchestration. Yet melodrama also depends on the quality of performers' voices—especially the inarticulate squeaks, grunts, and rasps that show the human body

pushed beyond endurance—and on other expressive aspects of the soundscape (the howling wind, the clanking shutters, and so forth). Survival games use these elements to convey fear, but they're rarely used for other emotions. Game designers can't expect to achieve melodramatic impact if they continue to shortchange the audio.

So if you want to design a game that will make players cry, study melodrama.

Henry Jenkins and Kurt Squire are co-directors of The Education Arcade, which is based at MIT and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. More information on the program can be found at educationarcade.org

random incoherence BY KELLY WAND

Communication Breakdown

How to talk to a non-gamer (if you must)

As an internationally renowned games columnist who's never afraid of trying to understand the tough questions, I find myself asked quite a few by random people on the street. The second most common one is, perhaps unsurprisingly, "How much did the *Doom* movie pwn?"

I can safely testify firsthand that, as a movie to take your mom to on her birthday, the cinematic version of *Doom* not only didn't pwn, it didn't even know how to suck properly. As Mom herself pointed out to several ushers, okay, fine, there's no hell in a movie based on a game set in hell, but no shotgun or rocket launcher? What does she pay you people for?

Still, the most fascinating legacy of *Doom* the movie emerged when film critic Roger Ebert lambasted it as a waste of his time. An irate fan wrote back that Ebert lacked the credentials to analyze a movie based on a videogame, since Ebert admitted to never having played one. The thumb-y one retorted that he considered videogames a waste of time, and, so long as one book or film was left un-

read or unviewed by him, he had smarter things to do.

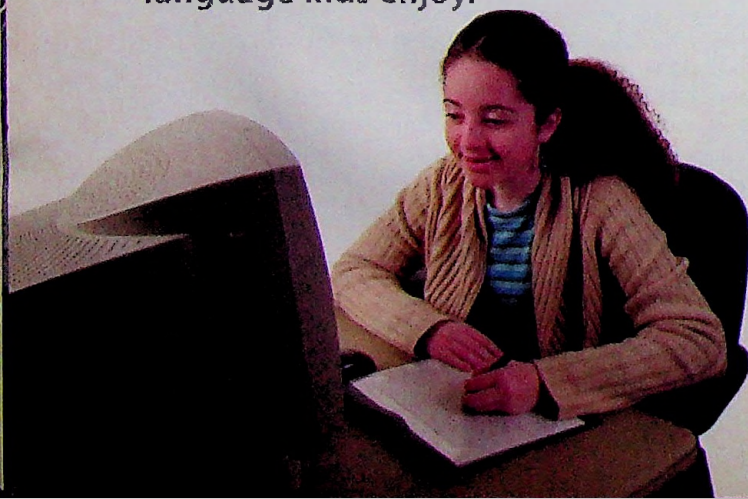
Apparently, a lot of gamers read Ebert. By his own reckoning, hundreds of letters from pissy kids poured in, roasting him for being too old to "get" games. Eventually, intelligent, thoughtful types—including esteemed developers—weighed in, stating the not unprecedented position that games are a new art form in its infancy, and in fact one not far removed from film in myriad ways Ebert himself should be the first to appreciate.

Who gets to say what art is anyway? How much of it's just a matter of taste? Obviously, Ebert's taste is based on limited experience with games and decades of exhaustive film analysis, and that's where his head will always be at. To him, *Doom* the game will never constitute art in the same legal breath as *Doom* the movie. Perhaps long ago there existed a respected cave painting critic who lived to see the very first statues sculpted and went, "Kids and their soulless fads."

Where Ebert might pick movies over anything else, I'd sacrifice games in a heartbeat for print, though not without some anguish. In other words, I'd rather read this magazine than play any of the actual games discussed in its pages. (I'd pick games over movies, though.) And, however reluctantly, I have to concur with Ebert. Games can't be classified as real art, at least not yet. It's too soon. Electronic entertainment is still adrift in the same boat that kept graphic novels from being recognized as a potentially mature storytelling forum for decades. Like comic books, games are approached by everyone involved as disposable juvenilia, a prophecy that becomes self-fulfilling.

Every art form goes through growing pains; mutations are necessary for evolution. Unlike writing, creating videogames of even poor quality is so technically complicated that people who have the expertise and an equally impressive sense of aesthetics are tough to find,

"Games are homework written in a language kids enjoy."



train, and keep happy for a sustained period in a corporate environment.

So Ebert's right. Life is too short. And frankly, a lot of stuff we've all taken for granted for far too long simply has to go. To name just a few examples:

Tough-talking brunettes. The female protagonists in games are always steely, quasi-Asian smartasses with straight dark hair. Can't we at least occasionally vary the skin tone or eye shape, just a little? And not every girl in a game has to be smokin' hot. Let me play Bea Arthur for a change; I've already role-played as the girl who wouldn't sleep with me plenty of times.

Reactor cores. We've blown those up already. Make something else. Preferably not a warehouse, sewer, or wall-duct.

Anything that's harder in the game than it would be in real life. This ranges from typing in keycodes to pouring boiling oil on unwelcome visitors.

There's no "role-playing" in role-playing games, MMOs least of all. In terms of role-playing options, nothing that goes by the moniker even approaches *The Sims*. A *Sims* set in the *Forgotten Realms*; where do I sign?

Crate busting. Breaking boxes isn't fun, although smashing barrels admittedly might be. But you've already bashed something open to look for other stuff inside when you opened the box to remove the CD, so the simulated version feels like sloppy seconds. Besides, I don't buy an entire city region's being festooned with barrels filled with valuables no one else thought to bust open till I strolled along. Which brings us to...

Crate stacking. *Half Life 2* had you using a crane to drop crates on swarms of guys. Now that the bar's been raised, there's no turning back.

Collection quests. The bane of MMOs. Sometimes your item drops, sometimes it doesn't. It's sadistic busywork re-defined. Practically every genre has a similar variation: kill 20 birds to collect 10 plumes; open five empty crates to find the key to the next area; buy six purses for Barbie in case one breaks. Note to game designers: don't hate the player, hate the game. That you're making.

Dying, reloading, dying, reloading. Trial-and-error puzzles aren't entertainment. If you have to pull things off in an intricate sequence without saving and you can't figure it out without looking online (and even then you can't do it after 20 more tries), who really sucks, you or the level designer?

Boss fights. Ah, our most cherished staple. A game's naked without a finale in which you circle-strafe backward dodging a thundering behemoth as you steadily whittle its health bar down, all to earn a cutscene of its exploding and the satisfaction of knowing a third-grader could have done it in a fraction of the time. If that's not art, what is?

So there you have it: the only nine things preventing Roger Ebert from pwning noobs in *Alterac Valley*. On the bright side, there are only nine, and most are pretty easy fixes.

Rest assured, if they'd been complicated, they wouldn't have made any list you'll ever see here.

Next month: And, by unanimous decision, the winner for best MMO zone of 2006 is once again... Toxxulia Forest! Congrats to all who participated, check's in the mail.

coming soon



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three finger salute BY TOM CHICK

The Lone Star State

When bad things get said about bad games

"C'mon, you're killing us here. 40%? You really think it's that bad?"

I hate this part. Normally I'd try to explain that 2 stars is not a 40%, no matter what Gamerankings.com says. But I'm not sure what he wants from me, since the review has been written, turned in, and published. Even if I wanted to, it's not as if I could say, "You know, you're right. It's really more of a 60%. Let me add a star in the next issue."

Some PR folks actually want to talk about the substance of my complaints, and I really appreciate these discussions. If I'm going to bitch and moan about something someone has created, the least I can do is also try to be helpful. But I get the feeling this fellow hasn't even read the review. He was probably put up to this by his boss. Or maybe he wants to be able to go to the developers and say he gave me a good talking to.

"Is it just that you're more of a tac sim guy?" he asks.

I don't even know what "tac sims" are, but I ignore the slightly insulting implication that I'm either not qualified or simply biased. It's a common

"If I'm going to bitch and moan about something someone has created, the least I can do is try to be helpful."

defense mechanism. The most disappointing time this happened to me was with a producer for SSI, Carl Norman, who presided over some of the publisher's best games. He was no PR guy, but someone whose name I'd known and whose work I'd admired for years. I had just reviewed—unfavorably, natch—a submarine sim he produced. He wrote the following on a forum: "I don't usually comment about reviews, but when it comes to Tom Chick, I have to say that I have NEVER seen a positive review for any SSI product." Caps his.

My first reaction was to take offense. How dare he? But upon reflection, I considered why he might write such a thing. Maybe Norman did it to reassure fans of the game whose enthusiasm needed validation. He'd probably already

said it to the developers. Maybe he even believed it. Heck, maybe it was true and he simply didn't see the enthusiastic reviews I'd written, even for his own games.

I've been on the other end of negative reviews, so I understand. I really do. When I used to do theatre, a play would get a bad review. The cast was demoralized. To make themselves feel better, they would set about discrediting the reviewer and therefore his criticism.

"I'm pretty sure he doesn't like comedies."

"Yeah, someone said he didn't come back after the intermission."

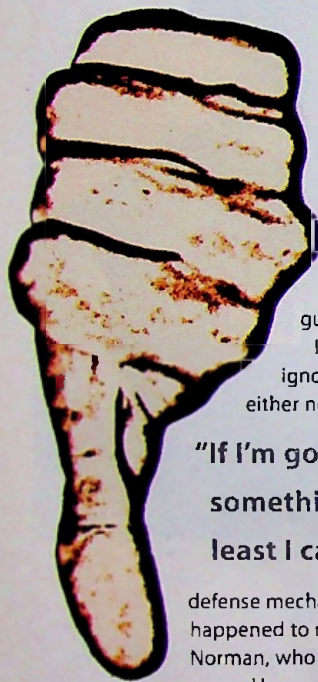
"He's got an issue with Cathy. He gave her last play a bad review. Some kind of weird bias."

"Screw him!" is how it usually concluded. The cast bucked up, convinced themselves they were, in fact, golden, and then put on another show, something game developers don't always have the luxury of doing. Gamerankings scores come up in meetings that will determine what, if anything, a developer does next. It's not just personal. It's business.

And the bad reviews stick with you. I fared well enough when I did the actor thing. But I don't remember the positive reviews, which inclines me to think Norman believed his own comment. However, nearly fifteen years later, I still remember the school paper's review of an outdoor production of *Midsummer Night's Dream* in which I played Puck, running around shirtless with fake wings on my back. "Tom Chick is flat and insipid." I don't doubt it was right, but at the time I was sure the reviewer hadn't stayed and seen me do the "If we shadows have offended" speech at the end. Screw him!

So when I'm filling in the words under that single star, or maybe the equally sad pair of stars, I think of all those poor European developers I've slagged over the years, the failed Ubisoft shooters, the strategy games with their bad interfaces and AI, the buggy RPGs and clumsy RTSs, the legions of budgetware, shovelware, and bargain bin titles, the failed franchises and the lost licensing tie-ins, all bad and all called out in pages like these. They march before me like the ghosts of Richard III's victims visiting him on the eve of his battle with Richmond.

"Forgettable and out of his league." I got a bad review for that one as well, but I'm pretty sure the reviewer didn't like tragedies. ■



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